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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

35¢ SEPTEMBER

OPERATION AFREET

a novelet by

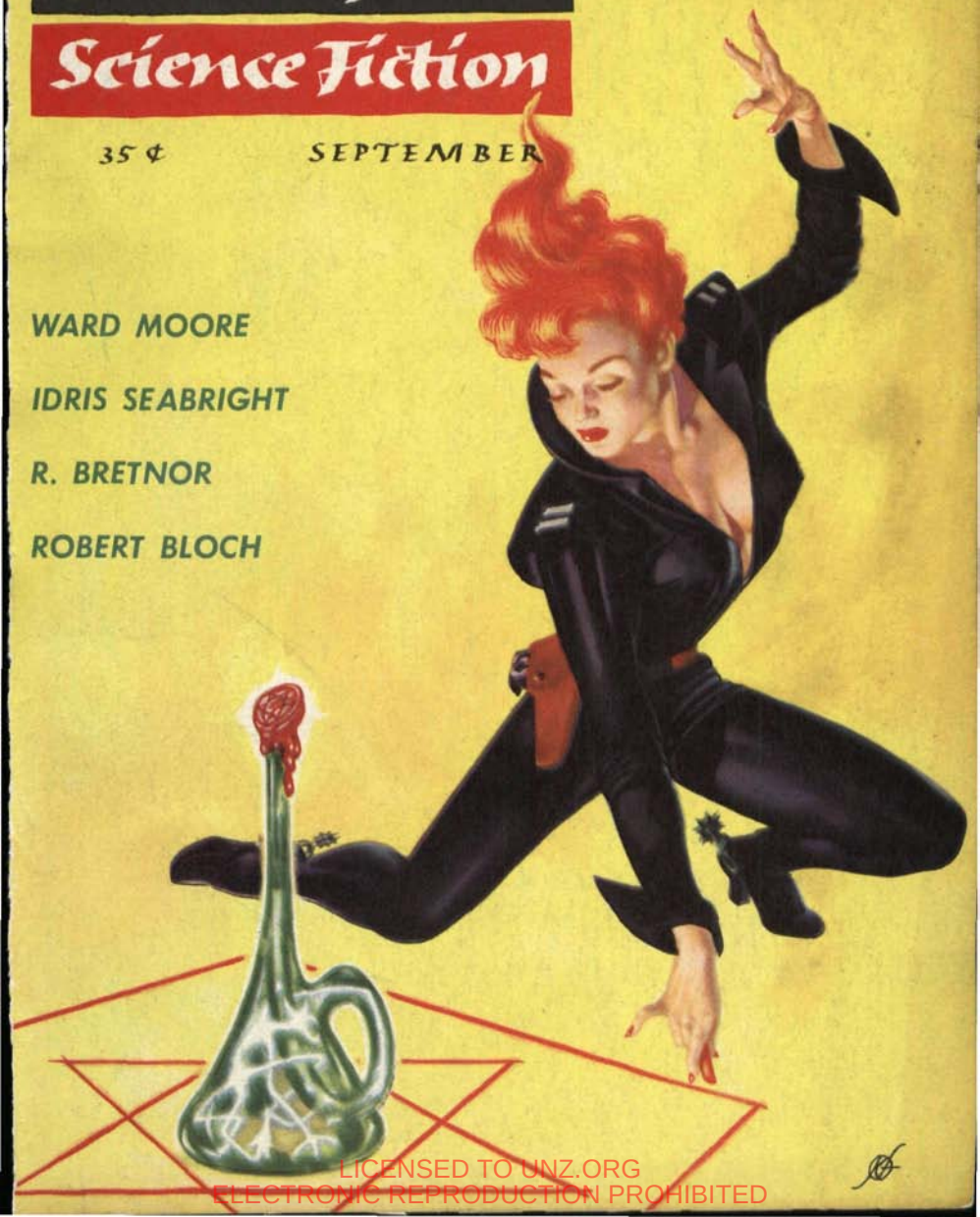
POUL ANDERSON

WARD MOORE

IDRIS SEABRIGHT

R. BRETNOR

ROBERT BLOCH



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To: PROMOTION DEPARTMENT

From: EDITORIAL DEPARTMENT

Re: Full-page announcement of new serial by Robert A. Heinlein, The Door into Summer, starting next month in F&SF (out August 30)

Sure, a full-page announcement's a good idea. We don't want any readers possibly missing out on the beginning of this. Only what do we say that's more alluring than the simple fact itself? "Here's Heinlein's new adult science fiction novel--only his third specifically adult book-length s.f. since before the war--and we think it's the best of the lot."

If the mere announcing of a honey of a new book by the best living writer of pure science fiction (stress on both words) isn't enough to attract every reader with a spark of ~~imagination~~ imagination, we're in the wrong business.

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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

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COVER PAINTING BY KELLY FREAS

(*Illustrating "Operation Afreet" by Poul Anderson*

Joseph W. Ferman, PUBLISHER *Anthony Boucher*, EDITOR

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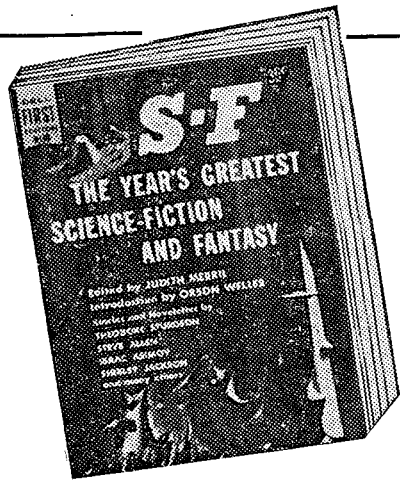

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Poul Anderson has been writing (and selling) science fiction and fantasy for almost 10 years—a good third of his entire life span. At the age of 30, he has published more millions of words than most writers have at 50. F&SF alone has bought some 200,000 Andersonian words; and there's hardly a magazine in the field in which he has not appeared. One must regret, however, that Anderson never had the opportunity to appear in the unforgettable Unknown Worlds; *it's true his career began before he could vote, but he was only an unpublished 17 when that great magazine of the impossible-and-logical perished. The one advantage of this situation (which I hope eventually to see rectified by time travel) is that Anderson, as a result, writes his completely* Unknown*-type stories for F&SF—such as this lively study of commando tactics in the very near future, when Twentieth Century Man has applied his technological skill to the scientific refinement of magic.*

Operation Afreet

by POUL ANDERSON

IT WAS SHEER BAD LUCK, OR MAYBE their Intelligence was better than we knew, but the last raid, breaking past our air defenses, had spattered the Weather Corps tent from here to hell. Supply problems being what they were, we couldn't get replacements for weeks, and meanwhile the enemy had control of the weather. Our only surviving Corpsman, Major Jackson, had to save what was left of his elementals to protect us against thunderbolts; so otherwise we took whatever they chose to throw at us. At the moment, it was rain.

There's nothing so discouraging as a steady week of cold rain. The ground turns liquid, and runs up into your boots, and they get so heavy you can barely pick them up. Your uniform is a drenched rag around your shivering skin, the rations are soggy, the rifles have to have extra care, and always the rain drums down on your helmet till you hear it in dreams. You'll never forget that endless gray washing and beating; ten years later a rainstorm will still make you feel depressed.

The one consolation, I thought, was that they couldn't very well attack us from the air while it went

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on. Doubtless they'd yank the cloud cover away when they were ready to strafe us, but our broomsticks could scramble as fast as their carpets could arrive. Meanwhile, we slogged ahead, a whole division of us with auxiliaries—the 45th, the Lightning Busters, pride of the United States Army, turned into a wet misery of men and dragons hunting through the Oregon hills for the invader.

I made a slow way through the camp. Water ran off the pup tents and gurgled in the slit trenches. Our sentries were, of course, wearing Tarnkappen, but I could see their footprints form in the mud and hear the boots squelch and the steady stream of tired monotonous cursing.

I passed by the Air Force strip—they were bivouacked with us, to give support as needed. A couple of men were on guard outside the knockdown hangar, not bothering with invisibility. Their blue uniforms were as mucked and bedraggled as my OD's, but they had shaved and their insignia—the winged broomstick and the anti-Evil Eye beads—were polished. They saluted me, and I returned the gesture idly. *Esprit de corps,* wild blue yonder, nuts.

Beyond was the armor. The boys had erected portable shelters for their beasts, so I only saw steam rising out of the cracks and caught the rank reptile smell. Dragons hate rain, and their drivers were having a hell of a time controlling them.

Nearby lay Petrological Warfare, with a pen full of hooded basilisks writhing and hissing and striking out with their crowned heads at the men feeding them. Personally, I doubted the practicality of that whole corps. You have to get a basilisk quite close to a man, and looking straight at him, for petrifaction; and the aluminum-foil suit and helmet you must wear to deflect the influence of your pets is an invitation to snipers. Then, too, when human carbon is turned to silicon, you have a radioactive isotope, and maybe get such a dose of radiation yourself that the medics have to give you St. John's Wort plucked from a graveyard in the dark of the moon.

So, in case you didn't know, cremation hasn't simply died out as a custom; it's become illegal under the National Defense Act. We have to have plenty of old-fashioned cemeteries. Thus does the age of science pare down our liberties.

I went on past the engineers, who were directing a gang of zombies carving another drainage ditch, and on to General Vanbrugh's big tent. When the guard saw my Tetragammaton insignia, Intelligence Corps, and the silver bar on my shoulder, he saluted and let me in. I came to a halt before the desk and brought my hand up.

"Captain Matuchek reporting, sir," I said.

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Vanbrugh looked at me from beneath shaggy gray brows. He was a large man with a face like weathered rock, very much Regular Army, but we all liked him as well as you can like a buck general. "At ease," he said. "Sit down. This'll take a while."

I found a folding chair and lowered myself into it. There were two others already seated whom I didn't know. One was a plump man with a round red face and a fluffy white beard, a major with the crystal-ball emblem of the Signal Corps. The other was a young woman. In spite of my weariness, I blinked and looked twice at her. She was worth it—a tall green-eyed redhead with straight high-cheeked features and a figure too good for the WAC clothes or any other. Captain's bar, Cavalry spider . . . or Sleipnir, if you want to be official about it.

"Major Harrigan," grumfed the general. "Captain Graylock. Captain Matuchek. We may as well get down to business."

He spread a map out before us. I leaned over and looked at it. Positions were indicated, our own and the enemy's. They still held the Pacific seaboard from Alaska halfway down through Oregon, though that was considerable improvement from a year ago, when the Battle of the Mississippi had turned the tide.

"Now then," said Vanbrugh, "I'll tell you the overall situation. This is a dangerous mission, you don't have to volunteer, but I want you to know how important it is."

What I knew, just then, was that I'd been told to volunteer or else. That was the Army, at least in a major war like this, and in principle I couldn't object. I'd been a contented Hollywood actor when the Saracen Caliphate attacked us. I wanted to go back to more of the same, but that meant finishing the war.

"You can see we're driving them back," said the general, "and the occupied countries are all set to revolt as soon as they get a fighting chance. The British have been organizing the underground and arming them while readying for a cross-Channel jump. But we have to give the enemy a decisive blow, break this whole front and roll 'em up. That'll be the signal. If we succeed, the war will be over this year. Otherwise it might drag on for another three."

I knew it. The whole Army knew it. Official word hadn't been passed yet, but somehow you feel when a big push is impending. There is a tension in the air.

His stumpy finger traced along the map. "The 9th Armored Division is here, the 12th Broomborne here, the 14th Cavalry here, the Salamanders here where we know they've concentrated their firebreathers. The Marines are all set to establish a beachhead and retake Seattle, now that the Navy's bred

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enough Krakens. One good goose, and we'll have 'em running."

Major Harrigan snuffled into his beard and stared gloomily at a crystal ball. It was clouded and vague; the enemy had been jamming all our crystals till they were no use whatsoever, though naturally we'd retaliated. Captain Graylock tapped impatiently on the desk with a perfectly manicured nail. She was so clean and crisp and efficient, I decided I didn't like her looks after all. Not while I had half an inch of beard bristling from my chin.

"But apparently there's something gone wrong, sir," I ventured.

"There is, damn it," said Vanbrugh. "In Trollburg."

I nodded. The Saracens held that town. It was a key position, sitting as it did on U.S. Highway 20 and guarding the approach to Salem and Portland.

"I take it we're suppose to seize Trollburg, sir," I murmured.

Vanbrugh scowled. "That's the job for the 45th," he grunted. "If we muff it, they can sally out against the 9th, cut it off, and throw the whole operation akilter. But now Major Harrigan and Captain Graylock come from the 14th to tell me the Trollburg garrison has an afreet."

I whistled, and a chill crawled along my spine. The Caliphate had exploited the Powers recklessly—that was one reason why the rest of the Moslem world regarded them as heretics and hated them as much as we did—but I never thought they'd go so far as breaking Solomon's Seal. An afreet getting out of hand could wreck a whole nation.

"I hope they haven't more than one," I whispered.

"No, they don't," said the Graylock woman. Her voice was low and could have been pleasant if it weren't so brisk. "They've been dredging the Red Sea in hopes of finding another Solly bottle, but this seems to be the only one left."

"Bad enough, though," I said. The effort to keep my tone steady helped calm me down all around. "How'd you find out?"

"We're with the 14th," said Graylock unnecessarily. Her Cavalry badge had surprised me, though; normally, the only recruits the Army can dig up to ride unicorns are pickle-faced, dried-up schoolteachers and the like.

"I'm only a liaison officer," said Major Harrigan quickly. "I go by broomstick myself." I grinned at that. No American male, unless he's in holy orders, likes to admit he's qualified to control a unicorn. He saw me and flushed angrily.

Graylock went on, as if dictating. She kept her voice flat, though little else. "We had the luck to capture a bimbashi in a commando attack. I questioned him."

"They're pretty close-mouthed, those noble sons of . . . um . . . the desert," I said. I'd bent the Geneva Convention myself, occasion-

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ally, but didn't relish the idea of breaking it completely—even if the enemy had no such scruples.

"Oh, we practiced no brutality," said Graylock. "We housed him and fed him very well. But the moment a bite of food was in his throat, I'd turn it into pork. He gave up pretty fast, and spilled all he knew."

I had to laugh aloud, and even Vanbrugh chuckled; but she sat there perfectly dead-pan. Organic-organic transformation, which merely shuffles molecules around without transforming atoms, has no radiation hazards but naturally requires a good knowledge of chemistry. That's the real reason the average dogface hates the technical corps: pure envy of a man who can turn K rations into steak and French fries. The quartermasters have enough trouble conjuring up the rations themselves, without branching into fancy dishes.

"So you found out they have an afreet in Trollburg," said the general. "What about their strength?"

"A small division, sir. You can take the place readily enough, if that demon can only be immobilized," said Harrigan.

"Yes. So I see." Vanbrugh swiveled his eyes around to me. "Well, captain, are you game? If you can carry it off, it'll mean a Silver Star at least—pardon me, a bronze one."

"I . . ." I paused, fumbling after words. I was more interested in promotion and ultimate discharge, but that might follow too. However, quite apart from my own neck, there was a practical objection. "Sir, I don't know a damn thing about the job. I nearly flunked Demonology I in college."

"That'll be my part of it," said Graylock.

"You!" I picked my jaw off the floor again, but couldn't find anything else to say.

"I was head witch of the Arcane Agency in New York before the war," she said coldly. Now I knew where she got that personality: the typical big-city career girl. I can't stand them. "I know as much about handling demons as anyone on this coast. Your task will be to escort me safely to the place and back."

"Yeah," I said weakly. "Yeah, that's all."

Vanbrugh cleared his throat. He didn't like sending a woman on such a mission, but with time as short as it was, he had no choice. "Captain Matuchek is one of the best werewolves in the business," he complimented me. He only compliments people he doesn't expect to see again. *Ave, Caesar, morituri te salutant. No, that isn't what I mean, but what the hell? I'll be dead long enough to figure out a better phrasing.*

"I think two adepts can get past their guards," he went on. "It's up to you. We attack at noon tomorrow, and that afreet had better be

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out of action by then. Now, here's a geodetic survey map of the town and the approaches . . ."

He didn't waste time asking me if I had really volunteered.

I guided Captan Graylock back to the tent I shared with two brother officers. Darkness was creeping through the long cold slant of rain; it would be night soon. We plodded through the muck in silence until we were under the canvas. My tentmates were out on picket duty, so we had the place to ourselves. I lit the Glory Hand and sat down on the sodden floor.

"Have a chair," I said, pointing to our one camp stool. It was an animated job we'd bought in San Francisco—not very bright, but it would carry our duffel and come when called. It shifted uneasily at the unfamiliar weight, then went back to sleep.

Graylock took out a pack of Wings and raised her brows. I nodded my thanks, and the cigaret flapped over to my mouth. Personally, I smoke Luckies in the field: self-striking tobacco is convenient when your matches may be wet. When I was a civilian and could afford it, my brand was Philip Morris, because the little red-coated smoke sprite can mix you a drink while you wait.

We puffed for a bit in silence, listening to the rain. "Well," I said at last, "I suppose you have transportation."

"My personal broomstick," she said. "I don't like this GI Willys. Give me a Cadillac anytime. I've souped it up, too."

"And you have your grimoires and powders and whatnot?"

"Just some chalk. No material agency is much use against a powerful demon."

"Yeh? What about the sealing wax on the Solly bottle?"

"It isn't the wax that holds an afreet in, but the seal. The spells are all symbolic; in fact, it's believed their effect is purely psychosomatic." She hollowed the flat planes of her cheeks, sucking in smoke, and I saw what a good bone structure she had. "We may have a chance to test that theory tonight."

"Well, then, you'll want a light pistol loaded with silver slugs—they have weres of their own, you know. I'll take a carbine and a .45 and a few grenades."

"How about a squirter?"

I frowned. The notion of using holy water as a weapon has always struck me as blasphemous, though the chaplain said it was all right against Low World critters. "No good to us," I said. "The Moslems don't have that ritual, so of course they don't use any beings that can be controlled by it. Let's see, I'll want my polaroid flash too."

Ike Abrams stuck his big nose in the tent flap. "Would you and the lady captain like some eats, sir?" he asked.

"Why, sure," I said. "Hate to

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spend my last night on Midgard standing in a chow line." When he had gone, I explained to the girl: "Ike's only a private now, but we were good friends in Hollywood—he scripted *Call of the Wild* and *Silver Chief* for me—and he's kind of appointed himself my orderly. He'll bring us some food here."

"You know," she remarked, "that's one good thing about the technological age. Did you know there used to be anti-Semitism in this country?"

"No. Was there?"

"Quite a bit. Especially a completely false belief that Jews were cowards and never found in the front lines. Now, when they live in an era where their religion forbids them to cast spells, they're all dogfaces and commandos, and everybody knows it."

I myself had gotten tired of comic-strip supermen and pulp-magazine heroes having such monotonously Yiddish names—don't Anglo-Saxons belong in our culture too?—but it was a good point she made. And it showed she was a trifle more than just a money machine. A bare trifle.

"What'd you do in civilian life?" I asked, chiefly to drown out the incessant noise of the rain.

"I told you," she snapped, once again the ice factory. "I was with the Arcane Agency. Advertising, public relations, and so on."

"Oh, well," I said. "Hollywood is as phony, so I shouldn't sneer."

I couldn't help it, though. Those Madison Avenue characters give me a pain in the rear end. Using the good Art to puff up some self-important nobody, or to sell a product whose main virtue is its complete similarity to other brands of the same. The SPCA has cracked down on training nixies to make fountains spell out words, or cramming young salamanders into glass tubes to light up Broadway, but I can still think of better uses for slick paper than trumpeting Ma Chère perfume. Which is actually a love potion anyway, though you know what postal regulations are.

"You don't understand," she said. "It's part of our economy—part of our whole society. Do you think the average backyard warlock is capable of repairing . . . oh, say a lawn sprinkler? Hell, no! He'd probably let loose the water elementals and flood half a township if it weren't for the inhibitory spells. And we, Arcane, undertook the campaign to convince the Hydros they had to respect our symbols. I told you it's psychosomatic when you're dealing with these really potent beings. For that job, I had to go down in an aqualung!"

I stared at her with more respect. Ever since it was found out how to degauss the ruinous effects of cold iron, and the age of science began, the world has needed some pretty bold people. Apparently she was one of them.

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Just then Abrams brought in two plates of rations. He looked wistful, and I would have invited him to join us except that our mission was secret.

Captain Graylock 'chanted the coffee into martinis (not quite dry enough) and the dogfood into steaks (a turn too well done); but you can't expect the finer sensibilities in a woman, and it was the best chow I'd had in a month. She relaxed a bit over the brandy, and I learned that her repellent crispness was only defensive armor against the slick types she dealt with, and we found out that our first names were Stephen and Virginia. But then it was quite dark outside, and time to get going.

You may think it was sheer lunacy to send only two people, and one of them a woman, into an enemy division on a task like this. It would seem to call for a Ranger brigade, at least. But present-day science has transformed war as well as industry, medicine, and ordinary life. Our mission was forlorn in any event, and we wouldn't have gained enough by numbers to make reinforcements worthwhile. We simply had to do it ourselves.

You see, it takes so much study and practice to become adept that only a very small minority qualify. If you're a born were—and only about five percent of the population is—you can transform, you know instinctively; and if you don't have those chromosomes, you can't by any means. Also, everyone can learn a few simple spells, enough to operate a broomstick or a vacuum cleaner or a turret lathe, but many years of work are required for ability to do more. Just imagine somebody trying alchemy without a thorough knowledge of nuclear physics. He'd either get a radioactive isotope that would kill him, or blow up half a county.

My scientific friends tell me that the Art involves regarding the universe as a set of Cantorian infinities. Within any given class, the part is equal to the whole and so on. One good witch could do all the running we were likely to need; a larger party would simply be more liable to detection, and would risk valuable personnel. So Vanbrugh had very rightly sent us two alone.

The trouble with sound military principles is that sometimes you personally get caught in them.

Virginia and I turned our backs on each other while we changed clothes. She got into an outfit of slacks and combat jacket, I into the rubberized garment which would fit me as well in wolf-shape. We put on our helmets, hung our equipment around us, and turned about. Even in the baggy green battle clothes she looked good.

"Well," I said tonelessly, "shall we go?"

I wasn't afraid, of course. Every

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recruit is immunized against panic when they put the geas on him. But I didn't like the prospect.

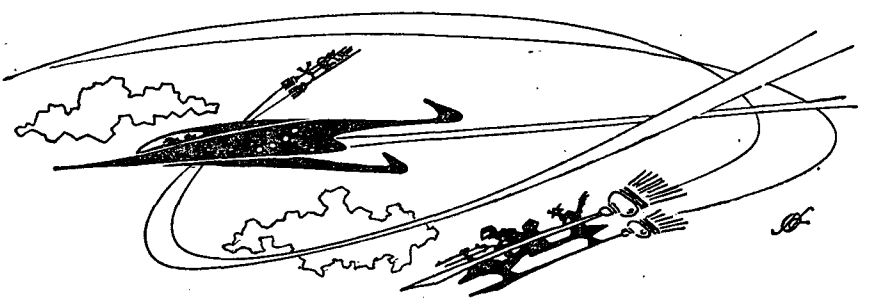
"The sooner the better, I suppose," she answered. Stepping to the entrance, she whistled.

Her stick swooped down and landed just outside. It had been stripped of all the fancy chrome, but was still a neat job—the foam-rubber seats had good shock absorbers and well-designed back rests, unlike Army transport. Her familiar was a gigantic tomcat, black as a furry midnight, with two malevolent yellow eyes. He arched his back and spat indignantly. The weatherproofing spell kept the rain off, of course, but he didn't like the damp in the air.

Virginia chucked him under the chin. "Oh, so Svartalf," she murmured. "Good cat, rare sprite, prince of darkness, if we outlive this night you shall sleep on cloudy cushions and lap cream from a golden bowl." He cocked his ears and raced his motor.

I climbed into the rear seat, put my feet in the stirrups, and leaned back. The girl mounted in front of me and crooned to the stick. It swished upward, the ground fell away and the camp was hidden in gloom. Both of us had been given witch-sight—infrared vision, actually—so we didn't need lights.

When we got above the clouds, there was a giant vault of stars overhead and a swirling dim whiteness below. I saw a couple of P-56's circling on patrol, fast jobs with



six brooms to lift their weight of armor and machine guns. We left them behind and streaked northward. I rested the carbine on my lap and sat listening to the split air whining past. Underneath us, in the harsh-edged murk of the hills, I spied occasional flashes; an artillery duel was going on. So far no one had been able to cast a spell fast enough to turn or implode a shell. I'd heard rumors that General Electric was developing a gadget which could recite the formula in a few microseconds, but meanwhile the big guns went on talking.

Trollburg was only a few miles

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from our position. I saw it as a vague sprawling mass, blacked out against our cannon and bombers. It would have been nice to have an atomic weapon just then, but as long as the Tibetans keep those anti-nuclear-warfare prayer wheels turning such thoughts must remain merely wistful. I felt my belly muscles tighten. The cat bottled out his tail and swore. Virginia sent the broomstick slanting down.

We landed in a clump of trees and she turned to me. "Their outposts must be somewhere near," she whispered. "I didn't dare try landing on a rooftop, we could have been seen too easily. We'll have to go in from here."

I nodded. "All right. Wait till I come back."

I turned the flash on myself. It was hard to believe that transforming had depended on a bright full moon till only ten years ago. Then Weiner showed that the process was simply one of polarized light of the right wavelengths, triggering the pineal gland, and the Polaroid Corporation made another million dollars or so from its Were-Wish Lens. It's not easy to keep up with this fearful and wonderful age we live in, but I wouldn't trade.

The usual rippling, twisting sensations, the brief drunken dizziness and half-ecstatic pain, went through me. Atoms reshuffled into whole new molecules, nerves grew some endings and lost others, bone was briefly fluid and muscles like stretched rubber. Then it was past, and I shook myself, stuck my tail out the flap of the skintight pants, and muzzled Virginia's hand.

She stroked my neck, behind the helmet. "Good boy," she whispered. "Go get 'em."

I turned and faded into the brush.

A lot of writers have tried to describe how it feels to be were, and all of them have failed because human language doesn't have the words. My vision was not so good now, the stars were blurred above me and I couldn't see to right or left and the world took on a colorless flatness. But I heard with a clarity that made the night almost a roar, way up into the supersonic; and a universe of smells roiled in my nostrils, wet grass and teeming dirt, the hot sweet little odor of a scampering fieldmouse, the clean tang of oil and guns, a faint harshness of smoke—poor stupefied humanity, half dead to the world's earthy glories!

The psychological part is the hardest to convey. I was a wolf now, with a wolf's nerves and glands and instincts, a wolf's sharp but limited intelligence. I had a man's memories and a man's purposes, but they were unreal, dreamlike, it took an effort of trained will to hold to them and not go hallooing off after the nearest jackrabbit. No wonder weres had a bad name in the old days,

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before they themselves understood the mental changes involved and got the right habits drilled into them from babyhood.

I weigh a hundred and eighty pounds, and the conservation of mass holds good like all laws of nature, so I was a pretty big wolf. But it was easy to flow through the bushes and meadows and gullies, another drifting shadow. I was quite close to the town when I caught the near smell of man.

I flattened, the gray fur bristling along my spine, and waited. The sentry came by. He was a tall bearded fellow with little gold earrings that glimmered wanly under the stars. The turban wrapped around his helmet bulked monstrous against the Milky Way.

I let him go and followed his path until I saw the next one. They were placed around Trollburg, each pacing a hundred-yard arc and meeting his opposite number at either end of it. No simple task to—

Something murmured in my ears and I crouched. One of their aircraft ghosted overhead; I could see two men and a couple of machine guns squatting on top of the carpet. It circled low and lazily, above the ring of sentries. Trollburg was well guarded.

Somehow, Virginia and I had to get through that picket. I wished that the transformation had left me with full human reasoning powers. My wolf-impulse was simply to jump on the nearest man, but that would bring the whole garrison down on my hairy ears.

Wait—maybe that was what was needed!

I loped back to the thicket. The Svartalf cat scratched at me and zoomed up a tree. Virginia Graylock started, her pistol sprang into her hand, then she relaxed and laughed a bit nervously. I could work the flash hung about my neck, even as I was, but it went more quickly with her fingers.

"Well?" she asked when I was human again. "What'd you find out?"

I described the situation, and saw her frown and bite her lip. It was really too shapely a lip for such purposes. "Not so good," she reflected. "I was afraid of something like this."

"Look," I said, "can you locate that afreet in a hurry?"

"Oh, yes. I've studied at Congo U. and did quite well at witch-smelling. What of it?"

"If I attack one of those guards, and make enough noise doing it, their attention will all be turned that way. You should have an even chance to fly across the line unobserved, and once you're in the town your Tarnkappe—"

She shook her red head. "I didn't bring one. Their sniffers are just as good as ours. Invisibility is actually obsolete."

"Mmm— . . . yeh, I suppose you're right. Well, anyhow, you

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can take advantage of the darkness to get to the afreet house. From there on, you'll have to play by ear."

"I suspected we'd have to do something like this," she replied. Then with a softness that astonished me: "But Steve, it's a long chance for you to take."

"Not unless they hit me with silver, and most of their cartridges are plain lead. They use a tracer principle like us; every tenth round is argent. I've got at least a ninety per cent probability of getting away with it."

"You're a liar," she said. "But a brave liar."

I wasn't brave at all. It's inspiring enough to think of Valley Forge, or the Alamo, or Bataan, or Casablanca where our outnumbered army stopped three Panther divisions of von Ogerhaus' Afrika Corps—but only when you're safe and comfortable yourself. Down underneath the antipanic geas, there was a cold knot in my guts. But I couldn't see any other way to do the job, and failure to attempt it would mean court-martial.

"I'll run their legs off once they start chasing me," I told her. "When I've shaken 'em, I'll try to circle back and join you."

"All right." Suddenly she stood up on tiptoe and kissed me. The impact was explosive.

I stood for a moment, looking at her. "What are you doing Saturday night?" I asked, a little shakily.

She laughed. "Don't get ideas, Steve. I'm in the Cavalry."

"Yeh, but the war won't last forever." I grinned at her, a reckless fighting grin that made her eyes linger. It's helpful having acting experience.

We settled the details as well as we could. She herself had no soft touch: the afreet would be well guarded, and was dangerous enough in itself. The chances of our both seeing daylight were not good.

I turned back to wolf-shape and licked her hand. She rumpled my fur, and I slipped off into the darkness.

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I had chosen a sentry well off the highway, across which there would surely be barriers. A man could be seen to either side of my victim, tramping slowly up and down. I glided behind a stump near the middle of his beat and waited for him.

When he came, I sprang. I had a dark brief vision of eyes and teeth white in the bearded face, I heard him yelp and smelled the upward spurt of his fear, then we shocked together. He went down on his back, threshing, and I snapped for the throat. My jaws closed on his arm, and blood was hot and salt on my tongue.

He screamed again, and I sensed the call going down the line. The nearest Saracens ran to help. I tore out the gullet of the first man and bunched myself for a leap at the next.

He fired. The bullet went through me in a jag of pain and the impact sent me staggering. But he didn't know how to deal with a were. He should have dropped on one knee and fired steadily till he got to the silver bullet; if necessary, he should have fended me off, even pinned me with his bayonet, while he shot. This one kept running toward me, calling on the Allah of his heretical sect.

My tissues knitted as I plunged to meet him. I got past the bayonet and gun muzzle, hitting him hard enough to knock the weapon loose but not to bowl him over. He braced his legs, grabbed my neck, and hung on.

I swung my left hind leg back of his ankle and shoved. He fell with me on top, the position an infighting werewolf always tries for. My head swiveled, I gashed open his arm and broke his grip.

Before I could settle the business, three others had piled on me. Their trench scimitars went up and down, in between my ribs and out again. Lousy training they'd had. I snapped my way free of the heap —there were half a dozen by then —and broke loose.

Through the sweat and blood I caught the faintest whiff of Chanel No. 5, and something in me laughed. Virginia had sped past the confusion, riding her stick a foot above ground, and was inside Trollburg. Now it was up to me to lead a chase and not stop a silver slug while doing it.

I howled to taunt the men spilling from the outlying houses, let them have a good look at me, and then made off across the rolling fields. I was taking it easy, not to outpace them at once, relying on zigzags to keep me unpunctured. They took the bait and followed, stumbling and shouting.

As far as they knew, this had been just a commando raid. Their pickets would be re-formed by now and the garrison alerted, but they had no way of telling what we had really planned. Maybe we'd pull the operation off after all—

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Something swooped overhead, one of their damned carpets. It rushed down on me like a hawk, the guns spitting. I made for the nearest patch of woods.

Into the trees! Given half a break, I could—

They didn't give it. There was a bounding behind me. I caught the acrid smell and whimpered. A weretiger could go as fast as I.

For a moment I remembered an old guide I'd had, up in Alaska, and wished to hell he were here. He was a were-Kodiak bear. Then I whirled and met the tiger before he could pounce.

He was a big one, five hundred pounds at least. His eyes smoldered above the great fangs, and he lifted a paw that could crack my spine like a dry twig. I rushed in, snapping, and danced back before he could strike.

I could hear the enemy, blundering around in the underbrush trying to find us. The tiger leaped. I evaded him and bolted for the nearest thicket. Maybe I could go where he couldn't. He romped through the woods behind me, roaring.

I saw a narrow space between two giant oaks, too small for him, and hurried that way. But it was too small for me too. In the instant that I was stuck, he caught up and the lights went out.

Consciousness returned a few minutes later. It had been a cuff on the neck. My head hammered, and I retched.

"Get up." Someone stuck a boot in my ribs.

I lurched to my feet. They'd used my flash to make me human again, then removed it with the rest of my equipment. There were a score of them holding their guns on me. Tiger Boy was standing nearby; in man-shape he was almost seven feet tall and monstrously fat. Squinting through the headache, I saw he wore the insignia of an emir—which was a military rank these days rather than a title, but important.

"Come," he said. He led the way, and I was hustled along behind.

I saw their carpets in the sky and heard the howling of their own weres looking for spoor of other Americans. I was still too groggy to care very much.

We entered the town, its pavement sounding hollow under the boots, and went toward the center. Trollburg wasn't big, maybe 5,000 population. Most of the streets were empty. I saw a few Caliphate soldiers, anti-aircraft guns poking into the sky, a dragon lumbering past with flames flickering around its jaws and cannon projecting from the armored howdah. No trace of the civilians, but I knew well enough what had happened to them. The attractive young women were in the officers' harems, the rest dead or locked

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away pending shipment to the slave markets.

By the time we got to the hotel which was now enemy headquarters, my aches had subsided and my brain was clear. That was a very mixed blessing under the circumstances. I was taken upstairs to a suite and told to stand before a table. The emir sat down behind it, half a dozen guards lined the walls, and a young pasha of Intelligence seated himself nearby.

The emir's big face turned to that one, and he spoke a few words —I suppose to the effect of "I'll handle this, you take notes." Then he looked at me. His eyes were the pale tiger-green.

"Now then," he said in good English, "we shall have some questions. Identify yourself, please."

I told him mechanically that I was called Sherrinford Mycroft, captain AUS, and gave him my serial number.

"That is not your real name, is it?" he asked.

"Of course not!" I replied. "I know the Geneva Convention, and you're not going to cast name-spells on me. Sherrinford Mycroft is my official johnsmith."

"The Caliphate has not subscribed to the Geneva Convention," said the emir quietly, "and stringent measures are sometimes necessary in a jihad. What was the purpose of this raid?"

"I am not required to answer that," I said. Silence would have served the same end, delay to gain time for Virginia, but not as well.

"You may be persuaded to do so," he said.

If this had been a movie, I'd have told him I was picking daisies, then kept on wisecracking while they brought out the thumbscrews. In practice it would have fallen a little flat.

"All right," I said. "I was scouting."

"Only one of you?"

"A few others. I hope they got away." That might keep his boys busy hunting for a while.

"You lie," he said dispassionately.

"I can't help it if you don't believe me," I shrugged.

His eyes narrowed. "I shall soon know if you speak truth," he said. "If not, then may Eblis have mercy on you."

I couldn't help it, I jerked where I stood and sweat pearled out on my skin. The emir laughed. He had an unpleasant laugh, a sort of whining growl deep in his fat throat, like a tiger playing with its kill.

"Think it over," he advised. Then he turned to some papers on the table.

It was very quiet in the room. The guards stood as if cast in bronze. The young shavetail dozed beneath his turban. Behind the emir's back, a window looked out on a blankness of night. The only sound was the loud ticking of a

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clock and the rustle of the papers. It only seemed to deepen the silence.

I was tired, my head ached, my mouth tasted foul and thirsty. The sheer physical weariness of having to stand was meant to help wear me down. It occurred to me that the emir must be getting scared of us, to take all this trouble himself with a lone prisoner. That was kudos for the triumphant American cause, but small consolation to me.

My eyes flickered, studying the tableau. There wasn't much to see, the usual dreary hotel furnishings. The emir had cluttered his desk with a number of objects: a crystal ball useless because of our own jamming, a fine cut-glass bowl looted from somebody's house, a set of nice crystal wineglasses, a cigar humidor of quartz glass, a decanter full of what looked like good scotch. I guess he just liked crystal.

He helped himself to a cigar—waving his hand to make the humidor spring open and a Havana fly into his mouth and light itself. As the minutes crawled by, an ashtray soared up from time to time to receive from him. I supposed that everything he had was 'chanted so it would rise and move easily; a man that fat, paying the price of being a really big werebeast, needed such conveniences.

It was very quiet. The light glared down on all of us. It was somehow hideously wrong to see a good ordinary GE St. Elmo shining on those turbaned alien heads.

I began to get the forlorn glimmerings of an idea. How to put it into effect I didn't yet know, but just to pass the time I began to compose some spells.

It must have been after half an hour, though it seemed more like half a century, when the door opened and a fennec, the small fox of the African desert, trotted in. The emir looked up as it went into a closet, to find darkness in which to use its flash. The fellow who came out was, naturally, a dwarf barely one foot high. He prostrated himself and spoke rapidly in a thin thready voice.

"So." The emir's chins turned slowly around to me. "It is reported that no trace was found of other tracks than yours. You have lied."

"Didn't I tell you?" I asked. My throat felt stiff and strange. "We used owls and bats. I was the only wolf."

"Be still," he said tonelessly. "I know very well that the only werebats are vampires, and that all vampires are—what you say—4-F in all armies."

That was true enough, of course. Every so often, some armchair general asks why we don't raise a force of Draculas. The answer is routine: they're too light and flimsy; they can't endure sunshine; if they don't get a steady blood ra-

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tion they're apt to turn on their comrades; and you can't possibly use them with or against Italian troops. I swore at myself, but my mind had been too numb to think straight.

"I believe you are concealing something," went on the emir. He gestured at his glasses and decanter, which supplied him with a shot of scotch, and sipped judiciously. The Caliphate sect is also heretical with respect to strong drink—they maintain that the Prophet forbade only wine, but said nothing about beer, gin, whisky, brandy, rum, or akvavit.

"We shall have to use stronger measures," he said at last. "I was hoping to avoid them." He nodded at his guards.

Two of them held my arms, while the pasha began working me over. He was good at it. The werefennec watched avidly, the emir puffed his cigar and went on with his paperwork. After a very long few minutes, he gave an order. They let me go, and even set forth a chair for me, which I needed badly.

I sat breathing hard. The emir looked up with a certain gentleness. "I regret this," he said. "It is not enjoyable." Oddly enough, I believed him. "Let us hope you will be reasonable before we have to inflict permanent injuries. Meanwhile, would you like a cigar?"

It was the old third degree procedure. Knock a man around for a while, then show him kindness. You'd be surprised how often that makes him blubber and break.

"We are in need of information about your troops and their plans," said the emir. "If you will cooperate and accept the true faith, you can have an honored position with us. We like to have good men in the Caliphate." He smiled. "After the war, you could select your harem out of Hollywood if you desired."

"And if I don't squeal—" I murmured.

He spread his hands. "You will have no further wish for a harem. The choice is yours."

"Let me think," I begged. "It isn't easy."

"Please do," he answered urbanely, and returned to his papers.

I sat as relaxed as possible, drawing the smoke into my throat and letting strength flow back. The Army geas could be broken by their technicians only if I gave my free consent, and I didn't want to. I considered the window behind the emir. It was a two-story drop to the street.

Most likely, I'd just get myself killed. But even that was preferable to any other offer I'd had.

I went over the spells I'd rigged up. A real technician has to know at least one arcane language—Latin, Greek, classical Arabic, Sanskrit, Old Norse, or the like—for the usual reasons of sympathe-

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tic science. Extraordinary phenomena are not strongly influenced by ordinary speech. But except for the usual tag-ends of incantations, just enough to operate the gadgets of daily life, I was no scholar.

However, I knew one slightly esoteric dialect quite well. I didn't know if it would work, but I'd try.

My muscles tautened as I moved. It was a shuddersome effort to be casual. I knocked the end of ash off my cigar. As I lifted the thing again, it picked up some ash from the emir's.

I got the rhyme straight in my mind, put the cigar to my lips, and subvocalized the spell:

"Ashes-way of the urningbay,
upward-way ownay eturning-ray,
as-way the arksspay do yflay,
ikestray imhay in the eye-way!"

I closed my right eye and brought the glowing cigar end almost against the lid.

The emir's El Fumo leaped up and ground itself into *his* right eye.

Even as he screamed and fell backward, I was on my feet. I'd marked the werefennec, and one stride brought me over to him. I broke his vile little neck with a backhanded cuff and yanked off the flash that hung from it.

The guards howled and plunged for me. I went over the table and down on top of the emir, snatching up his decanter en route. He clawed at me, wild with pain, I saw the ghastly hollowness of his eyesocket, and all the time I was hanging on to the vessel and shouting:

"Ingthay of ystalcray,
ebay a istralmay!
As-way I-way owthray,
yflay ouyay osay!"

As I finished, I broke free of the emir and hurled the decanter at the guards. It was lousy poetics, and might not have worked if the fat man hadn't already sensitized all his stuff. As it was, the ball, the ashtray, the bowl, the glasses, the humidor, and the windowpanes all took off after the decanter. The air was full of flying glass.

I didn't stay to watch the results, but went out that window like an exorcised devil. I landed in a ball on the sidewalk, bounced up, and began runnng.

Soldiers were around, and bullets started sleeting after me. I set a record reaching the nearest alley. My witch-sight showed me a broken window, and I wriggled through that. Crouching beneath the sill, I heard the pursuit go by.

It was the back room of a looted grocery store, plenty dark enough for my purposes. I hung the flash around my neck, turned it on myself, and made the changeover. They'd return in a minute, and I didn't want to be vulnerable.

Wolf, I snuffled around after another exit. There was a rear door

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standing half open, and I slipped into a courtyard full of ancient packing cases. They made a good hideout. I lay there, striving to control my lupine nature which wanted to pant, while they swarmed through the area.

When they were gone again, I tried to consider my situation. The temptation was to hightail it out of this poor, damned place; I could probably make it, and had technically fulfilled my share of the mission. But the job wasn't really complete, and Virginia was all alone with the afreet—if she still lived—and . . .

When I tried to call up her image, it came as a she-wolf and a furry odor. I shook my head angrily. Weariness and desperation were submerging my reason and letting the animal instincts take over. I'd better do whatever had to be done fast.

I cast about. The town smells were confusing, but I picked up the faintest sulfurous whiff and trotted cautiously toward it. I kept to the shadows, and was seen once but not challenged—they must have supposed I was one of theirs. The brimstone reek grew stronger.

They kept the afreet in the courthouse, a good solid building. I went through the little park in front of it, snuffed the wind carefully, and then dashed over the street and up the steps. Four enemy soldiers sprawled there, throats cut open, and the broomstick was parked by the door. It had a twelve-inch switchblade in the handle, and Virginia had used it like a flying lance.

The man side of me, which had been entertaining stray romantic thoughts, backed up in a cold sweat; but the wolf grinned. I poked at the door. She'd 'chanted the lock open and left it that way. I stuck my nose in, and almost had it clawed off before Svartalf recognized me. He jerked his tail curtly, and I went through and across the lobby. The stinging smell was coming from upstairs, and I followed it through a thick darkness.

There was light in one second-floor room. I thrust the door ajar and peered in. Virginia was there. She had drawn the curtains and lit the Elmos to see by. She was still busy with her precautions, started a little on spying me but went on with the chant. I parked my shaggy behind near the door and watched.

She'd chalked the usual figure, same as the Pentagon in Washington, and a Star of David inside that. The Solly bottle was at the center. It didn't look like much, an old flask of hard-baked clay with its hollow handle bent over and returning inside—just a Klein bottle, with Solomon's Seal in red wax at the mouth. She'd loosened her hair, and it floated in a ruddy cloud about the pale beautiful face.

The wolf of me wondered why

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we didn't just make off with the crock—it was safely stoppered. The man reminded him that undoubtedly the emir had taken precautions and would have sympathetic means to uncork it from afar. We had to put the demon out of action—somehow . . . but nobody on our side knew a great deal about his race.

Virginia finished her spell, drew the bung, and sprang outside the pentacle as smoke boiled from the flask. She almost didn't make it, the afreet came out so fast. I stuck my tail between my legs and snarled. She was scared too, trying hard not to show it, but I caught the adrenalin odor.

The afreet had to bend almost double under the ceiling. He was a monstrous gray thing, more or less anthropoid, but with horns and long ears, a mouthful of fangs and eyes like hot embers. Turned loose, he could scatter any army on earth. Controlling him before he laid the country waste would be another problem.

Smoke swirled from his mouth as he roared something in Arabic. Virginia looked very small and helpless under his looming wings. Her voice wasn't quite as cool as it should have been: "Speak English, Marid. Or are you too ignorant?"

The demon huffed indignantly. "O spawn of a thousand baboons!" he answered. It was like conversing with a thunderstorm. "O thou white and gutless infidel thing, which I could break with my littlest finger, come in to me if thou darest!"

I was worried, not only by the chance of his breaking loose but by the racket he was making. It could be heard for a quarter mile.

"Be still, accursed of God!" said Virginia. It shut him up for a moment—like all his hell-breed, he flinched at holy names, though they couldn't stop him for long. She stood back a little, hands on hips, head thrown back to meet the gaze that smoldered above her. "Suleiman bin-Daoud, on whom be peace, didn't jug you for nothing, I see. Back to your prison and never come forth again, lest the anger of Heaven smite you!"

The afreet sneered. "Know that Suleiman the Wise is dead these three thousand years," he retorted. "Long and long have I brooded in my narrow cell, I who once raged free through earth and sky and Jehannum below, and now am I released to work my vengeance on the puny sons of Adam." He shoved against the invisible barrier, but one of that type has a rated strength of several million p.s.i. and it held firm enough for the moment. "O thou shameless unveiled harlot with hair of hell, know that I am Rashid the mighty, the glorious in power, the smiter of dragons! Come in here and fight like a man!"

I moved close to the girl, my

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hackles lifted. The hand that touched my head was cold and wet. "Paranoid type," she whispered. "All these harmful Low Worlders are psycho. It's our only chance. I don't know any spells to compel him directly, but—" Aloud she answered: "Shut up, Rashid, and listen to me. I too am of your race, and to be respected as such."

"Thou?" He howled with laughter. "Thou of the Marid race? Why, thou fish-faced antling, if thou'dst come in here I'd show thee thou'rt not even fit to—" The rest was pretty obscene.

"No, hear me," said the girl. "Look well." She made the cross sign which forbids lying. "The name is the being, and my name is Ginny."

It seemed reckless to give her *nomen* to him, but he started in surprise. "Art indeed?" he asked.

"Yes. Now will you listen to me? I came to give you good advice, as one jinni to another. I have powers too, you know, though I employ them in the service of Allah, the Omnipotent, the All-Knowing, the Compassionate."

He glared malevolently, but supposing her to be one of his species he was ready to put on a crude show of courtesy—until he could lure her inside, or break the barrier. "Well, then," he rumbled. "why camest thou to disturb my rest? Tomorrow I go forth to destroy the infidel host." He got caught up again in his dreams of glory. "Aye, well will I rip them, and trample them, and break and gut and flay them. Well will they learn the power of Rashid the bright-winged, the fiery, the merciless, the wise, the . . ."

Virginia waited out his adjectives, then said gently: "But Rashid, why must you wreak harm? All you earn by it is hate."

A whine crept into his bass. "Aye, thou speakest sooth. All the world hates me. All conspire against me. Had he not had the aid of traitors, Suleiman had never locked me away. All I have sought to do has been thwarted by envious ill-wishers—aye, but tomorrow comes the day of reckoning!"

Virginia lit a cigaret with a very steady hand and blew smoke at him. "But how you can trust the emir and his cohorts?" she asked "He too is your enemy. He only wants to make a cat's-paw of you, then back in the bottle!"

"Why—why—" The afreet swelled till the spacewarp barrier creaked. Lightning crackled from his nostrils. It hadn't occurred to him before, his race isn't very bright; but of course a trained psychologist would know how to follow out paranoid logic.

"Have you not known enmity all your long days?" continued Virginia quickly. "Think back, Rashid. Was not the very first thing you remember the cruel act of a spitefully envious world?"

"Aye—it was." The maned head

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nodded, and the voice dropped very low. "On the day I was hatched . . . aye, my mother's wingtip smote me so I reeled."

"Perhaps it was accidental," said Virginia.

"Nay. Ever she favored my older brother—the lout!"

Virginia sat down cross-legged. "Tell me about it," she advised. Her tone dripped sympathy.

I felt a lessening of the great forces that surged within the barrier. The afreet was squatting on his hams, eyes half shut, going back down a memory trail of millennia. Virginia guided him, a hint here and there. I didn't know what she was driving at, surely you couldn't psychoanalyze the monster in half a night, but—

". . . aye, and I was scarce turned three centuries when I fell into a pit my foes must have dug for me."

"Surely you could fly out of it," murmured Virginia.

The afreet's eyes rolled, and something twisted his face into still more gruesome furrows. "It was a pit, I say!"

"Not by any chance a lake?" she inquired.

"Nay!" His wings thundered. "No such damnable thing . . . 'twas dark, and wet, but—nay, not wet either, a cold which burned—"

I saw dimly that the girl had a lead. She dropped long lashes to hide the sudden gleam in her gaze. Even as a wolf, I could realize what a shock it must have been to an aerial demon, nearly drowning, his fires hissing into steam, and how he must ever after deny to himself that it had happened. But what use could she make of—

Svartalf the cat streaked in and skidded to a halt. Every hair on him stood up, and his eyes blistered me. He spat something and went out again with me following.

Down in the lobby I heard voices, and looking through the door I saw a few soldiers milling about. They'd come by, perhaps to investigate the noise, seen the dead guards, and now they must have sent after reinforcements.

Whatever Ginny was trying to do, she had to have time for it. I went out that door in one gray leap and tangled with the Saracens. We boiled into a clamoring pile. I was almost pinned flat by their numbers, but kept my jaws free and used them. Then Svartalf rode that broomstick above the fight, stabbing.

We carried a few of their weapons back into the lobby in our jaws, and sat down to wait. I figured it was better to remain wolf and be immune to everything but silver than to have the convenience of hands. Svartalf regarded a tommy gun thoughtfully, propped it up, and crouched over it.

I was in no hurry. Every minute we were left alone, or held off the coming attack, was a minute gained for Ginny. I laid my head

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on my forepaws and dozed off. It was much too soon that I heard boots ringing on pavement.

There must have been a good hundred of them. I saw their dark mass, and the gleam of starlight off their weapons. They hovered around the squad we'd liquidated, then whooped and charged up the steps.

Svartalf braced himself and worked the tommy gun. The recoil sent him skating back across the lobby, swearing, but he got a couple. I met the rest in the doorway.

Slash, snap, leap in, leap out, rip them and gash them and howl in their faces! They were jammed together in the entrance, slow and clumsy, it was a brief whirl of teeth and then they retreated. They left half a dozen dead and wounded.

I peered through the glass in the door and saw my friend the emir. There was a bandage over his eye, but he was rushing around exhorting his men with more energy than I'd expected. Groups of them broke loose from the main bunch and ran to either side. They'd be coming in the windows and the other doors.

I whined as I realized we'd left the broomstick outside. There could be no escape now, not even for Ginny. The protest became a snarl as I heard glass breaking and rifles blowing off locks.

That Svartalf was a smart cat. He found the tommy gun again and somehow, clumsy though paws are, managed to shoot out the lights. Then he and I retreated to the stairway.

They came at us in the dark, blind as most men are. I let them fumble around, and the first one who groped to the stairs was killed quietly. The second had time to yell. Then the whole gang of them crowded after him.

They couldn't shoot in the gloom and press without potting their own people. Excited to mindlessness, they attacked me with scimitars, which I didn't object to at all. Svartalf raked their legs and I tore them up—whick, snap, clash, Allah Akbar and teeth in the night!

The stair was narrow enough for me to hold, and their own casualties hampered them, but the sheer weight of a hundred brave men forced me back a tread at a time. Otherwise one could have tackled me and a dozen more have piled on top. As it was, we gave the houris a few fresh customers for every foot we lost.

I have no clear memory of the fight. You seldom do. But it must have been about twenty minutes before they fell back at an angry growl. Then the emir himself stood at the foot of the stairs, lashing his tail and rippling his gorgeously striped hide.

I shook myself wearily and braced my feet for the last round. The one-eyed tiger came slowly up the stairs. Svartalf spat, then suddenly zipped down the banister

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past him and disappeared in the gloom. Well, he had his own neck to think about. . . .

We were almost nose to nose when the emir lifted a paw full of swords and brought it down. I dodged it somehow and flew for his throat. All I got was a mouthful of baggy skin, but I hung on and tried to work my way inward.

He roared and shook his head till I swung like a bell clapper. I shut my eyes and clamped on tight. He raked my ribs with those long claws. I skipped away but kept my teeth where they were. Lunging, he fell on top of me, and his own jaws clashed shut. Pain jagged through my tail, and I let go to howl.

He pinned me down with one paw, raising the other to break my spine. Somehow, crazed with the hurt, I writhed free and struck upward. It was his remaining eye which was glaring down on me, and I bit it out of his head.

He screamed! A sweep of one paw sent me kiting up to slam against the banister. I lay there with the wind knocked from me while the blind tiger rolled over in his agony. The beast drowned the man, and he went down the stairs and wrought havoc among his own soldiers.

A broomstick whizzed above the melee. Good old Svartalf! He'd only gone to fetch our transportation. I saw him ride toward the door of the afreet, and got groggily up to meet the next wave of Saracens.

They were still trying to control their boss down there. I gulped for breath and stood watching and smelling and listening. My tail seemed ablaze. I looked and saw that half of it was gone.

A tommy gun began stuttering. I heard blood rattle in the emir's lungs. He was hard to kill. *That's the end of you, Steve Matuchek,* thought the man of me. *They'll do what they should have done in the first place, stand beneath you and sweep you with their fire, every tenth round argent.*

The emir fell and lay gasping out his life. I waited for his men to collect their wits and remember me.

Ginny appeared on the landing, astride the broomstick. Her voice seemed to come from very far away. "Steve! Quick—up here!"

I shook my head dazedly, trying to understand. I was too tired, too canine. She stuck her fingers in her mouth and whistled. That fetched me.

She slung me across her lap and hung on tight as Svartalf piloted the stick. A gun began firing blindly from below. We went out a second-story window and into the sky.

A carpet swooped near. Svartalf arched his back and poured on the Power. That Cadillac had legs! We left the enemy sitting there, and I passed out. . . .

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When I came to, I was lying prone on a cot in a hospital tent. There was bright daylight outside, the earth lay wet and steaming. A medic looked up as I groaned. "Hello, hero," he said. "Better stay in that position for a while. How're you feeling?"

I waited till full consciousness returned, then accepted the bouillon he gave me. "How am I?" I whispered—they'd humanized me, of course.

"Not too bad, considering. There was s o m e infection of your wounds, but we cleaned that up with a new antibiotic. You should be quite well in a month or less."

I lay thinking about that. A field hospital just doesn't have the equipment to stick micropins in bacteria. Often it doesn't even have the enlarged anatomical dummies on which the surgeon can do a sympathetic operation. "What technique do you mean?" I asked.

"Oh, one of our boys has the Evil Eye," he said. "He looks at the germs through a microscope."

I didn't inquire further, knowing very well that de Kruif would be writing it up in a few months. Something else nagged at me. "The attack . . . has it begun?"

"The—Oh. That. That was two days ago, Rin-Tin-Tin. You've been kept under asphodel. We mopped 'em up all along the line. Last I heard, they were across the Washington border and still running."

I sighed and went back to sleep. Even the noise as the medic dictated a report to his typewriter couldn't hold me awake.

Ginny came in the next day, with Svartalf riding her shoulder. Sunlight striking through the tent flap turned her hair to hot copper. "Hello, Captain Matuchek," she said. "I came to see how you were, soon as I could get leave."

I raised myself on my elbows, and whistled at the cigaret she offered. When it was between my lips, I said slowly: "Come off it, Ginny. We didn't exactly go on a date that night, but I think we're properly introduced."

"Yes." She sat down on the cot and stroked my hair. It felt good. Svartalf purred at me, and I wished I could respond.

"How about the afreet?" I asked after a while.

"Still in his bottle." She grinned. "I doubt if anybody'll ever be able to get him out again, assuming anybody would want to."

"But what did you *do?*"

"A simple application of Papa Freud's principles. If it's ever written up, I'll have every Jungian in the country on my neck, but it worked. I got him to spinning out his memories and illusions, and soon found he had a hydrophobic complex—which is fear of water, Rover, not rabies—"

"You can call me Rover," I growled, "but if you ever call me Fido, gives a paddling."

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She didn't ask why I assumed I'd be close enough in future for such laying on of hands. That encouraged me vastly. Indeed, she even blushed, but went on: "Having gotten the key to his personality, I found it simple to play on his phobia. I pointed out how common a substance water is and how difficult total dehydration is. He got more and more scared. When I showed him that all animal tissue, including his own, is about eighty percent water, that was it. He crept back into his bottle and went into a catatonic state."

After a moment, she added thoughtfully: "I'd like to have him for my mantelpiece, but I suppose he'll wind up in the Smithsonian. So I'll just write a little treatise on the military uses of psychiatry."

"Aren't bombs and dragons and elfshot gruesome enough?" I demanded with a shudder.

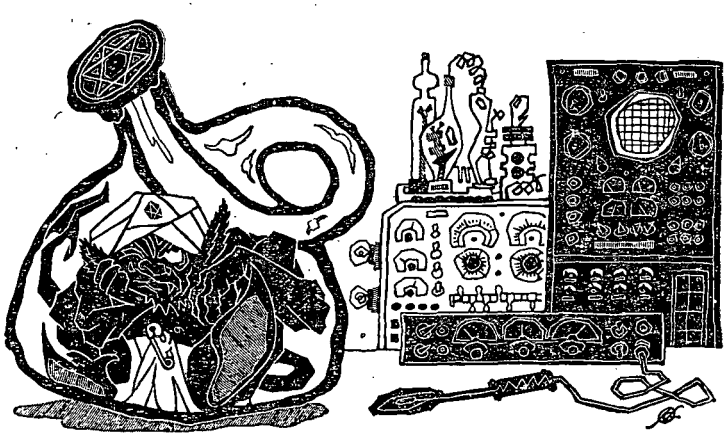
Poor simple elementals! They think they're fiendish, but ought to take lessons from the human race.

As for me, I could imagine certain drawbacks to getting hitched with a witch, but still and all—"C'mere, youse."

She did.

I haven't kept many souvenirs of the war. It was an ugly time and best forgotten. But there's one keepsake I'll always have, in spite of the plastic surgeons' best efforts. As a wolf, I have a stumpy tail, and as a man I don't like to sit down in wet weather.

It's a hell of a thing to get a Purple Heart for.



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One associates the by-line of Ward Moore with long and meaty novels (like GREENER THAN YOU THINK *or* BRING THE JUBILEE*) and novelets (like* Lot *or* No Man Pursueth*). But the powerful conviction of Moore's writing and thinking is evident even in such a short-short story as this, which has never before appeared in a magazine.*

Flying Dutchman

by WARD MOORE

AS THE MINUTE HAND OF THE WALL clock moved smoothly away from the still upright hour hand, the automatic calendar below twitched, and the numeral 11 succeeded the 10. Beyond a little spasmodic jerk, which might have indicated that the mechanism was not in perfect working order, the little plates bearing the designations *November* and *1998,* however, remained fixed. The control room being air-conditioned, the thermometer beside the door stayed exactly at 68.

There was no one in the control room to read the clock, calendar, thermometer, radarscreen, or any of the indicators which had their places on the walls and tables. Even if there had been, the occupant or intruder would have found it impossible to make out the figures, for the darkness was absolute: not only were the lights off, but blackout curtains guarded against betraying moonbeams being reflected on the smooth surfaces.

The absence of light and technicians did not disturb the functioning of the great airport's apparatus, for it had been designed to work automatically, with almost human ingenuity and more than human precision in any emergency short of a direct hit by the enemy or a near miss which might put not only the instruments but their repairing and readjusting auxiliaries out of order.

So when sonar and radar picked up the sound and form of approaching aircraft from the north, it was instantly and correctly identified as friendly, specifically an RB87 returning to base. The information was transmitted to the anti-aircraft batteries, to the intelli-

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gence depot thirty miles away, to the tabulators which recorded the bombing runs, to Fuel Control, far underground, and to the munitions dump, hidden beneath layer after layer of concrete and lead.

There were, of course, no rows of lights to mark the field, but this lack was of no consequence to the mighty eight-engined bomber; for it depended, not on human perceptions and reactions but on the precise mathematical calculation of equipment adjusted to its charted flight and acutely sensitive to every variation of the weather, the terrain below, inimical devices, or even suddenly developed inadequacies of its own. During every second in the air these instruments computed, compensated, checked, and kept the ship on an inexorable and preordained course.

The RB87, responding to the wind direction and velocity as well as a number of other factors, aimed itself at the two mile long concrete runway and skimmed down its length, coming to rest at last with its propellers still revolving pointlessly at the exact spot indicated in the reckonings which governed its navigation, marked on the runway by two small daubs of paint.

As the motors died and the propellers spun slower and slower, the complex services of the airbase, set in motion by the responses of the instruments in the darkened control room to the invisible image of the returning bomber, began to function. From the fuel storage an apparently endless hose snaked across the field, and reaching the bomber, became even more reptilian as it raised its head in response to electronic impulses, then crawling up the plane's towering side, blindly sought the intake leading to the empty gas tanks. A minute radio receiver responded to the message of an equally minute transmitter; the cap popped open and the nozzle of the hose slid into place. Far back in the fuel storage the contact was noted; pumps started up and the long hose stiffened as the aviation gasoline pulsed through it. The pumps lowered the level of the reservoirs; many miles off other pumps began working and pushing their load through the waiting pipeline, the machinery of a refinery came to life, sucking crude oil in and sending out high octane gas. Half a continent away a well drew more crude from deep in the shale and spewed it into an emptying tank.

The gasoline hose, being a fundamental, was the simplest contrivance among the resources of Fuel Control. The tanks filled, the nozzle retracted, the cap snapped into place, the hose reeled back into its nest, more complex engines appeared. The lubricating hose went from motor to motor, stimulating them to disgorge thin black burnt oil and replacing it with greenish golden lubricants, fresh and viscid. The mechanical grease-

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monkey, an incredible octopus on wheels, rolled across the field to fasten its tentacles on the multitude of fittings needing its services.

From the other side of the field, the automatic loaders bearing their priceless freight moved out in slow procession. They too were complex and subtle mechanisms which made their way to the bomber's side, and with infinite care, guided by sensitive devices, gently lowered the precious bombs into the bay. They waited patiently on each other, for they were geared and regulated against the contingency of collision. Like the emissaries from Fuel Control, they also had set antecedents in motion; underground plants far distant dispatched replacements by pneumatic tubes burrowing for miles beneath the surface of the earth like gigantic gopher tunnels.

The great engines cooled, the windsock atop the airport tower shifted slightly. Inside the dark control room the clock read 3:58. A little dust seeped deviously through the cracks around the windows; outside, a small chunk of concrete, cracked and loosened by the wind, broke free and fell to the ground. Miles away a row of trees, blasted and riven, refused, in brittle, dead stubbornness, to bow even slightly to the wind pressing hard against them.

At exactly four fifteen an electrical impulse from the control room, released in accordance with the predetermined pattern, started the plane's motors. For a moment there was a miss in the number 7 engine, then it too caught the rhythmic beat of the others. For a long time the bomber warmed up and then, with an appearance of unpremeditation, but at the precise moment called for, it began to roll forward.

The runway stretched out before it for a great distance and in spite of gathering speed the plane seemed to cling to it as though loath to leave the ground. At last however it wobbled slightly and a quickly growing space showed between wheels and concrete. Higher and higher it rose, clearing the tangle of powerlines beyond the airport by a wide margin. In the air it seemed uncertain for an instant, then, as the instruments measured and gauged, it nosed northward and drove steadily through the skies.

High over the earth it flew, higher than the clouds, higher than the thin shell of oxygenated air. The motors throbbed steadily except for the faintest perceptible hesitation now and then in number 7. The cunning instruments guided and checked constantly, holding the bomber's course toward its target, keeping it high above the range of any possible interception.

The faint, dull dawn picked, not too successfully, at the plane's outlines. The drab war paint gave back no reflection, but here and

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there it was scarred and flaked, and the bright aluminum beneath showed treacherously through. As the light grew brighter it became obvious that these were but superficial signs of the great bomber's weariness. A battered place here, a large dent there, a frayed cable, a faint warp were all evidences of hardships endured, of ominous limitations. Only the instruments and the motors were perfect, and even these, as the flutter in number 7 showed, were not destined to last forever.

Northward, northward, northward. The target had been fixed years before by grave men with expressionless faces. The course had been plotted by younger men with cigarettes dangling from their lips and the vital instruments set by still younger ones in coveralls who chewed gum. The target had not originally been a mark exclusively for The Flying Dutchman—the name some jovial mechanic had long ago painted on the fuselage—but intended for the attention of an entire squadron of RB87s, for it was an important industrial center, a vital part of the enemy's war potential, and its destruction was essential.

The grave men who decided strategy had been well aware of the nature of the war they were fighting. Every possible preparation had been made for all foreseeable eventualities; plans and alternative plans, and alternatives to the alternatives, had been carefully and thoroughly mapped. That the capital and the proud cities would be destroyed almost immediately was taken for granted, but the planners had gone much further than mere decentralization. In former wars operations had ultimately depended on men; the strategists knew how frail and fallible humans were. They thought with grim distaste of soldiers and mechanics made useless by uninterrupted bombardment or the effects of chemical and biological weapons, of civilians cowering in the innermost recesses of mines and caverns, their will to fight gone and only a base craving for peace left. Against this unstable factor the strategists had guarded zealously; they planned not only push-button war, but push-buttons for the push-buttons, and more push-buttons behind them. The civilians might cower and chatter, but the war would go on until victory was won.

And so The Flying Dutchman sped unerringly for its familiar goal, serviced and powered by an intricate network of tools, implements, factories, generators, underground cables and basic resources, all of them nearly impregnable to discovery and destruction, able to function until they wore out, which might not be—thanks to their perfection—for centuries hence.

The Flying Dutchman flew

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north, a creation of man no longer dependent on its creator.

It flew toward the city which had long since become finely pulverized rubble. It flew toward the outlying rings of antiaircraft batteries and the few serviceable guns left which would spot it on their radarscreens and automatically aim and fire, attempting to bring it to the fate of all its counterparts. The Flying Dutchman flew toward the country of the enemy, a defeated country whose armies had been annihilated and whose people had perished. It flew so high that far below its outstretched wings and steady motors the bulge of the earth made a great curving line, the earth, that dead planet, upon which no living thing had been for a long, long time.

Coming Next Month

The great event in our October issue, which will be on the stands about Labor Day, is of course the first installment of Robert A. Heinlein's compelling serial of science and adventure, THE DOOR INTO SUMMER . . . and of such a treat, what can a man say beyond "*Don't miss it!*"?

There'll be other treats as well: the first story in a year from Zenna Henderson (not a chronicle of The People, but a comparably tender and sensitive piece); one of the far too rare but always delightful tales by Avram Davidson, author of the memorable *The Golem;* plus stories by Charles Beaumont, Robert Bloch and others, and brief articles by J. J. Coupling and John Christopher.

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If there was ever a danger that Jules Verne might become a Name of purely historical significance, it has now passed; Verne's creations were never more alive, with new editions, new translations, new biographies and spectacular film versions popping up at every turn. Among the new editions is Dodd, Mead's Great Illustrated Classics version of AROUND THE WORLD IN EIGHTY DAYS, *which will be published about the time you read this and for which I was commissioned to write an introduction. In that introduction, I hit upon a new (I think) definition of the relation of Verne's work to s.f.; and so I pass it on to you here.*

Jules Verne: Voyagiste

by ANTHONY BOUCHER

JULES VERNE IS USUALLY LAUDED TODAY as "The Father [or Grandfather, or some sort of Pioneer Progenitor] of Modern Science Fiction," the predictor of today's submarine in TWENTY THOUSAND LEAGUES UNDER THE SEA, the forecaster of tomorrow's moon rocket in FROM THE EARTH TO THE MOON.

Yet his most successful and probably his best novel, AROUND THE WORLD IN EIGHTY DAYS, has nothing to do with science fiction (though it borrows one technical trick from the genre, hinging its plot upon a widely known but easily overlooked scientific datum); it happens yesterday, not tomorrow, and its events depend entirely upon scientific and technological advances which have already been achieved. And still this perfectly possible and even, in a highly imaginative way, realistic adventure is of a piece with all the other Verne narratives. For Verne did not consciously write "science fiction," "realistic fiction," or any other formally labeled type of story; he wrote *voyages*.

Voyages Extraordinaires, Verne called his entire 43-year output of 60-odd volumes . . . and thereby incidentally posed the first problem for his English translators. A *voyage* in English, the dictionaries insist, must be by water or air (to which science fiction writers have added the vacuum of space). But *journey* or *trip* are words too hum-

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drum to describe the travels of Vernian heroes through subterranean passages or over Siberian snows; and one is forced to set the dictionaries aside and simply use *voyage* in English exactly as Verne used it in French.

The Voyage, and particularly the Imaginary Voyage, can be traced back in literature as far as one cares to go, certainly past the beginnings of any literature still read today; and from the hero-studded voyage of the ship *Argo* through the travels of Lemuel Gulliver on to the Yellow Brick Road leading to the Kingdom of Oz, it remains one of the best forms for story-telling ever devised.

But in the work of authors before Verne, the voyage was only a means—a method of giving shape to the story, an excuse for introducing the characters to marvels human and animal and to unheard-of perils. Especially in the century before Verne, when the Voyage reached a peak of popularity, the act of traveling was merely a conventional pretext to reach some land whose alien mores could be used to satirize our own.

Born in 1823, coming of age at the midpoint in time between Montgolfier's balloon and the Wrights' airplane, writing in the decades in which railroads were spanning continents, Verne seems to have sensed the beginnings of the Age of Transport. He turned his creative attention away from the strange-objective-to-be-reached, and concentrated on the voyage itself as the focus of interest. In THE VOYAGE TO THE CENTER OF THE EARTH, the voyagers never reach the center; in FROM THE EARTH TO THE MOON, they do not land on the moon; and the much-misunderstood title of 20,000 LEAGUES UNDER THE SEA refers not to the depth of the locale (which would be absurd; 20,000 leagues is almost eight times the diameter of the earth!) but to the length of the voyage of the submarine *Nautilus*.

Some of Verne's voyages had not yet been achieved in his time, and therefore rank as science fiction; others were, at the date of publication, possible to anyone with the stamina, good fortune and financial resources of his heroes. In either case, his concern was to make the physical details of the voyage as accurately convincing as possible.

In Phileas Fogg's eighty-day circumnavigation of the globe, Verne achieved the Voyage of all Voyages —a voyage of which the starting-point is also the objective, in which the physical action of travel is the very core of the story, in which the hero is forced to employ "every means of conveyance—steamers, railways, carriages, yachts, trading vessels, sledges, elephants."

When LE TOUR DU MONDE EN QUATRE-VINGTS JOURS began to be serialized in *Le Temps* early in 1873, Verne was already a success-

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ful author; since his start in 1863 he had been averaging a book a year (including some of his best), and the public had developed a palate for his singularly entertaining voyages.

Shortly after Phileas Fogg had finally reentered the Reform Club to win his £20,000 wager, Verne was not only a successful author but (a phenomenon as rare then as now) a wealthy one. The novel itself was profitable enough; but the real money poured in from a spectacular dramatic version written by Verne with Adolphe d'Ennery. And in that version or various others (some pirated), the play has never disappeared in over 80 years. Little theater groups still offer it in this country; it was produced on Broadway not many seasons ago by Orson Welles; and now in 1956 we are promised a major film version to outshine in extravagant spectacle even the legendary original production of the Porte Saint-Martin.

Many of Verne's novels, admirable though they are, today seem to be period pieces for the delectation of the scholar. AROUND THE WORLD remains a living masterpiece —and only partly because of the nice dexterity of its plot construction, the eager liveliness of its storytelling movement, or the vividly varied background details. (And if Verne is less than accurate in depicting the Hindu or the Mormon religion, who could ask any *voyagiste*—save possibly C. S. Lewis—to be also a theologian?)

No, the reason for the continued vitality of AROUND THE WORLD is Mr. Phileas Fogg. Verne at his best shared with Conan Doyle the ability to create characters who are at once types and individuals, breathingly alive yet larger-than-life; and Captain Nemo, Captain Hatteras and Mr. Fogg claim immortality with Professor Challenger, Brigadier Gerard and Sherlock Holmes.

Phileas Fogg (so often erroneously alluded to as Phineas) is, in the absolute, *l'anglais avec son sangfroid habituel* ("the Englishman," as we are informed by BONERS and FRACTURED FRENCH, "with his usual bloody cold"). Precise, imperturbable, self-assured (Holmes himself might envy the Fogg dictum: "The unforeseen does not exist"), he seems a machine calculated to force any voyage to a successful conclusion. And yet once in the mountains of India and once on the plains of Nebraska he imperils his entire enterprise for reasons which the man he seems to be would condemn as quixotic . . . and, by one of Verne's deftest strokes of plotting, it is precisely those two human lapses which cause his ultimate success.

Fogg is perfectly balanced by the other two leading characters. Passepartout is the very prototype of the Ingenious Servant of French classical literature, lineal descendant of Beaumarchais' Figaro and

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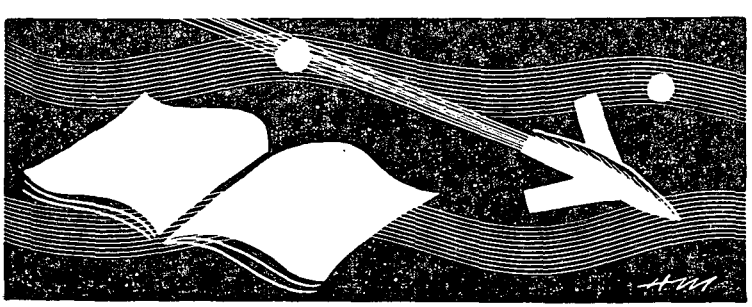
Molière's Sganarelle. Fix is surely the most ill-starred detective in fiction—clever, relentless, unscrupulous, tenacious . . . and dead wrong all the way. And from the interactions of the three men bubbles that vein of humor—not gag-writing, but the comic interplay of character—so typical of Verne.

This is a *voyage* indeed *extraordinaire*—rich in marvels, in excitement, in humor, in faithful recording of fact and in unexpected invention. It is the masterpiece of a master of science fiction; it is itself not s.f. by even the broadest definition; and yet, in its perfecting of the form of the Voyage, it provides a technical model for every writer of imaginative fiction.

If this note has (as is its intent) stirred in you a desire to read or re-read one of the world's most sheerly enjoyable stories (and to be in a position to compare the original with the forthcoming all-star film), you'll find new editions available on three price levels: the elegant Dodd, Mead Great Illustrated Classics format, with photographs from Verne's life and charming period illustrations from early editions ($3.25); a cheaper, un-illustrated hardcover reprint from Grosset & Dunlap ($1.49); and a Lion paperback (35c). The first two may, of course, be ordered through F & SF's Readers' Book Service (see page 128).



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In which Mr. Wilson shows that uncertainty, that most absolute form of terror, may be compounded of items as quietly ordinary as a roadside diner, an underpass, a toll bridge, a snail, and two goldfish bowls.

Lonely Road

by RICHARD WILSON

THE HUM OF THE TIRES AND THE throb of the heater had made him sleepy. He realized that when the hum became a squeal. He had taken a sharp curve unconsciously, at full speed. Time for a coffee stop, he decided.

He had been driving half the night. Another twelve hours to go. He could do it without sleep, if he didn't doze himself into a ditch. Coffee every three hours would help.

The red neon sign said EAT and the smaller one below it said DAN'S DINER, TRUCKERS WELCOME. But no trucks were parked there, and no cars. Maybe Dan's coffee wasn't so good. He'd have to take the chance. He stretched his cramped legs and breathed the good cold air, then went in and sat at the long blue counter.

He looked for someone to take his order.

No one came. He picked up a cardboard menu, though he knew what he was going to have. Coffee and a hamburger, and a piece of pineapple cheese pie if they had it. If not, then apple.

Still no one came. He rapped on the counter with the menu. Then he noticed that there was no fire under the grill and that no coffee was being kept hot.

He went behind the counter to a door that stood ajar. Behind it was a little storeroom, empty. He tried another door at the end of the diner. A washroom, also empty. Where was Dan?

There was a coke machine—caffein was caffein—but he wanted something hot. He went behind the counter again, prepared to apologize if Dan appeared, and took down a vacuum tin of coffee. He put water in the bottom of a glass coffee maker.

The coffee, as he brewed it, was foul. But he drank it, washing down a cold sandwich he'd made from meat and cheese in the re-

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frigerator. He had a piece of pie —apple—and drank a glass of water.

He computed the cost of the meal. He meant to leave the money on the counter but he had nothing smaller than a five. Feeling guilty, he went to the cash register, rang up $0.65 and made change.

He'd eaten too fast and the food lay heavy in his stomach. He breathed several lungfuls of cold air, got in the car and drove away fast, headlights stabbing through the blackness.

He needed gas. The luminous needle was uncomfortably close to the luminous *E*. Another dial told him it was 2:15. He'd passed a filling station a while back. The gas pumps had been lighted but the gas wasn't his brand. Any brand would do now. He found a station whose pumps were aglow and whose little office was lighted. He honked.

No one came.

He couldn't risk going on to the next one. He got out impatiently and went to the office. It was empty.

Where was everyone tonight? Now that he thought about it, he hadn't passed any cars for some time, in either direction. He couldn't remember how long it had been. Since dark? Nonsense. Still, he couldn't recall having dimmed his country beams for an oncoming car.

Then he remembered the sudden rain in the late afternoon which had darkened the sky and blurred his windshield. Other cars had turned on their headlights, he recalled now, and so had he. But his windshield wipers had refused to work and for a time he'd driven at a snail's pace, unwilling to get out into the rain to fix them. He'd come to a wide underpass then, pulled over and stopped. Sheltered from the downpour by the mass of concrete, he'd got out of the car and given the wipers a push. They immediately took up their click-click. They'd been stuck, that was all.

He'd been standing for a moment, stretching, when he noticed two pools of water near a catch basin. They'd reminded him of his son, dead these seven years. Among the last things he and Joan had bought for the boy were two fishbowls Bobby wanted for his experiment. He stared at the two pools in the underpass, thinking of the boy and of Joan waiting at home at the end of his drive. He got back in the car. He couldn't remember having seen another car after that.

Now, at the gas station, there was no response to his *Hallo*. He shrugged and went to the pumps. Self-service night, he thought.

He filled his tank and went back to the office. He took out the four singles he'd taken in change from

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the diner and looked for a place to leave them. There was no cash register here. Greasy papers, catalogs and small tools littered the top of a battered desk. He put the bills down in a clear spot and weighted them with a pair of pliers.

After he'd driven on for some minutes he became acutely aware of the fact that he'd seen no one else on the highway. It wasn't a U. S. highway, true, but it was a good state road, usually well-traveled.

Puzzled now and beginning to feel lonely, he switched on the radio. But button after button yielded only the static of dead air. That was strange. Ordinarily, even if he could get nothing else, he could bring in WWVA. The powerful station in Wheeling blanketed the eastern seaboard in the night hours, playing its hillbilly records and hawking its patent medicines and illustrated Bibles.

The luminous clock said 3:10. He switched off the radio and hummed to himself, nervously.

He came to the outskirts of a town. Street lights hung over the road and there was an occasional light in a house. Cars were parked along the curbs. He began to feel better.

A traffic light turned from green to amber as he approached it, then red. He stopped. A block ahead was what looked like an all-night drugstore. The traffic light turned green and he went ahead in low and parked. It was a drugstore and it was open.

He pushed through the door and rapped on the counter. He'd buy a pack of cigarettes, though he had plenty, and mention jovially to the night clerk that he'd begun to feel that he was all alone in the world. He'd tell him about the empty diner and the unattended gas station. The clerk might have an explanation.

No one answered his rap.

The store lay bright around him, a clutter of magazines, school supplies, candies, tobacco products. a soda fountain. He looked over the top of a frosted glass partition, back to where prescriptions were compounded. No one was there.

He hungered for someone—anyone.

There was a telephone booth he hadn't noticed before and he went to it with relief. He'd been getting himself into a state. The voice of the operator would snap him out of it. He dropped a dime in the slot, got a dial tone and dialed Operator. He would tell her about the empty drugstore and ask if she thought the police should know about it. He'd wait till the police came, he'd say.

He heard the ringing at the other end. At the tenth ring he pulled on the hook, got his dime back, reinserted it and dialed Operator again. After ten more rings he was beginning to sweat.

He unfolded the door of the

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booth and dialed 411, for Information. There was no answer.

He dialed 211, for Long Distance. No answer.

He dialed 611, for Repair Service. No answer.

He dialed seven times at random. No answer.

He fled out of the booth and out of the store. He roared the car away from the curb and through the town until he was again on the highway. It was more normal to be alone on the road. But his hand shook as he lit a cigarette. The clock on the dashboard said 4:55.

At dawn he turned off the headlights and rubbed his caking eyelids. His back and neck ached. He would have to stop and sleep. When he woke up maybe it would have been all a dream.

He found a tourist court. There was no one in the first cabin, marked OFFICE. He signed the book, *Clarence R. Spruance*, and put a five-dollar bill between its pages. He noticed that he had left his car where it would block the way for others. So, to avoid anything that would jeopardize a return to normal when he woke up, he parked the car carefully in front of the cabin he chose.

He let himself in, locked the door behind him, washed the grit from his eyes, undressed to his underwear, prayed on his knees for the first time since childhood, eased under the covers and slept.

When he awoke it was daylight again—or still. He stretched and scratched the bristles on his face. He would need a shave.

Then he remembered, all at once and in complete detail. And he knew it was no dream.

But perhaps it had changed. Maybe it was all right again—the people back, the noise and bustle and other cars on the highway. If they were, he would accept them. As a sort of bargain with himself, he would ask no questions. He would pretend they'd never been away.

But when he looked he saw nothing, heard nothing.

He was tempted to go back to bed, to try to sleep again, to give it another chance. For a long time he stood in his bare feet, looking out dully. Then he went into the bathroom and shaved.

He drove slowly, looking for a place to have breakfast. He didn't see any immediately and he drove faster. Then with a little laugh, he crossed to the far left lane and accelerated to 65 miles an hour, then 70. He held steady at 70, hugging the left edge of the concrete, laughing as he roared blindly around curves, bracing himself inwardly for a sudden head-on crash. His heart pounded at each left-hand curve and he had to force himself to keep his foot on the accelerator and hold the needle at 70.

But after a while he was taking

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the curves without panic and it began to seem normal to drive on the left. He felt depressed again, after his momentary exhilaration, and let the car decelerate to 40 as he eased across to the right.

He drove till he came to a gas station. He filled his tank, left some money in the office and drove on.

He noticed that he had only a few singles and some change remaining. There was really no reason for him to pay for anything but he felt that he must. If he did not, he would be accepting what was apparent—that he was the only person left. He would not accept that, and he determined that he would pay for what he took as long as he was able. It was a kind of insurance that the rest of humanity would return eventually from wherever it had gone.

So at the next town he went into a bank. At a teller's window he made out a check to cash, for two hundred dollars, signed *Clarence R. Spruance,* and pushed it under the grill. But there was no money within reach. He found his way to the back of the tellers' cages, went into the one he had picked from the other side and pulled open the drawer.

An alarm bell clanged, and continued to clang.

He stepped back in shock. Apparently there was a button that had to be touched so the drawer would open silently. The clanging unnerved him.

He made himself count out two hundred dollars, then count it again to be sure, and put the check in a slot where there were other checks. He shut the drawer but the harsh clanging continued. He made himself walk, not run, back around the cages and out the door. Another alarm was sounding outside with a terrible insistence.

The sound followed him through the empty town. He was glad to reach the open road again. He felt indignant about that alarm. It was unfair of it to have gone off that way, after he had been scrupulously ethical.

The tires hummed on the smooth road. The heater throbbed unnoticed. He didn't need the heater now, with the sun high and warm, but he'd neglected to turn it off. He became drowsy. His cigarette burned down and the heat of it on his knuckles roused him. He tossed out the butt and switched off the heater. Comfortable now but not sleepy, he drove for hours, automatically.

He slowed to read a sign. Forty-eight miles to go. As close as that.

He recognized the road now. The river was ahead, with a bridge. The toll bridge. He wondered if he'd be able to reach out and put a quarter on the counter inside the toll booth without leaving the car. He'd continue to pay as he went, people or no people.

He drove onto the bridge approach. You paid at the far end,

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he remembered. He slowed, took the quarter from his change pocket, transferred it to his left hand and coasted toward the booth.

A man in a gray uniform, with a badge, wearing a visored cap, stepped halfway out of the booth, hand extended, looking bored.

Spruance jammed on his brakes. The car bucked to a stop. The engine stalled. He sat, gripping the steering wheel, the quarter hard in his palm.

"Twenty-five cents, please," the uniformed man said.

Spruance held the coin out to him automatically.

"Twenty-five cents. Of course. That's right, isn't it?" He stared at the officer, felt the man's fingers pick the coin out of his palm. Stared at him. "You're back," he said.

"What?"

"I mean everything's the same. It's not—"

"Twenty-five cents," the officer said. "A quarter. That's what it's been as long as I can remember. You had it right."

"Yes, I did, didn't I? It's right, isn't it? It's all right again. The way it was before."

"Look, mister, you paid your toll. Now will you move along? Other people want to use the bridge, too, you know."

Spruance looked in his rear-view mirror. A car was behind him, waiting, and another car behind that one. Still other cars were moving along the highway at the end of the bridge.

The car behind him honked.

Spruance started his engine and went ahead slowly in first. The officer looked after him for a moment, then turned to take a coin from the next driver. Spruance shifted, then joined the road that ran south along the river bank. The car behind him made the same turn, honked again, then roared past. Other cars whizzed by from the opposite direction.

There was a sign, POPULATED AREA.

Then a town. A normal town, with people in it.

He found a parking space near a newsstand. He bought a metropolitan afternoon daily dated the 19th.

"Is this today's?" he asked the newsdealer.

"Yeah, sure."

He scanned the headlines but saw nothing unusual. He folded the paper under his arm and went into a lunchroom. Over coffee and scrambled eggs he looked at the paper from front to back, reading the first paragraph of each story. There was no hint in any of them that the major and minor crises of the world had been interrupted in any unusual way.

He beckoned to the counterman for a second cup of coffee. As he poured the cream in this time he noticed that it curdled slightly, as if it were a couple of days old.

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"This cream isn't fresh," he said.

The counterman looked sullen. "I only work here," he said. "If you want to complain I'll get the manager."

"Never mind," Spruance said. He got up, leaving the second cup of coffee untouched. He put down some coins and left.

He went back to the newsstand. "You wouldn't have a copy of yesterday's paper, would you? For the 18th?"

The newsdealer mumbled, not looking at him: "No. Sorry."

"Well, does this town have a daily paper?"

"Yeah, but it's not out yet."

"I see. Where's its office?"

"Two blocks down, turn right half a block. But—" The newsdealer looked up at him, then down again, quickly.

"But what?"

"Nothing. Nothing."

Spruance thanked him and went on down the street. The people he passed either avoided his glance or looked at him with . . . hostility? That couldn't be right. It wasn't such a small town that a stranger would be noticed or resented. He paused in front of the five and ten cent store and pretended to look in the window. Several people passed, some in couples. He noticed that the hostility was general. Everyone was being distant with everyone else.

At the newspaper office he told the girl at the reception desk he'd like to look at some back issues.

"How far back?"

"Yesterday and the day before, if I may."

She looked troubled. "I'll have to call the morgue. The library, I mean."

"I know," he said, smiling.

She said into the phone: "That's right, the 17th and 18th. . . . Oh. . . . Okay, I'll tell him. . . . Yes. I know." She turned to Spruance again. "I'm sorry. They haven't been filed yet."

"That's all right. I'll look at loose copies."

"No, sir, you can't. We don't—we can't make an exception."

"I see." She seemed almost frightened, so he added: "It doesn't matter. Thank you anyway. Goodby."

It was beginning to get dark.

His wife answered the phone on the ninth ring. While it was ringing he'd had the lonely feeling again and had to look out of the booth to assure himself that the people were still back. So he spoke almost sharply to his wife when she answered.

"Where were you?" he asked.

"I was in the attic. How are you, Clare? Will you be home soon?"

"Yes. I'm in Hayesville. I'm all right, I guess. How do you feel, Joan?"

"Fine. Are you sure you're all right? How was your trip?"

"I'll tell you about it later. What

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were you doing up in the attic?"

"I'll tell *you* later. It's a bit odd."

Joan had fixed coffee and a tray of sandwiches. "I thought we'd have a snack now and dinner later," she said.

"It's good to be back," he said. "I'm also glad you're back," he added with a little laugh. Then he told her what he meant.

She heard him out, frowning a little. "The check you left at the bank," she said. "That will come back in your statement."

"That's the only proof I have. If it proves anything. How about you? Are there two days you can't account for? Everybody I've spoken to seems to feel something's wrong but won't talk about it. Will you?"

"I was in the attic when it happened," she said slowly. "I'd gone up to look at Bobby's aquarium."

Bobby, their son, had died when he was nine. They'd had no other children but kept the big house anyway, with its attic full of memories.

"The aquarium," he said. "Two of them, identical, for Bobby's experiment."

"There *were* two," Joan said. "There's only one now."

She'd gone up to the attic late in the afternoon. Bobby's things lay under the eaves, dim in the light of the naked electric bulb near the top of the stairs. The tricycle he'd outgrown. The two-wheeler he'd just learned to ride when he became ill. His stack of books. A first baseman's glove. The aquariums.

Bobby had been very good about his illness. He became a tropical fish enthusiast, spending hours watching the gaily-colored creatures dart among the water plants and in and out of the pottery castle in the sand at the bottom of the big tank.

Then one day Bobby had asked for another aquarium, exactly like the first, down to the last plant and the castle. They had bought it for him, of course, and set it beside the other near his bed. Bobby made adjustments in the slope of the sand, the angle of the castle and the spacing of the plants.

His mother wanted to know about the twin aquarium but he wouldn't tell her anything except that it was an experiment. Later, when she'd left the room, closing the door at his request, he'd transferred the fish from the old tank to the new one.

Bobby died not long after that. Later the fish died, too, and they'd emptied the two aquariums and put them in the attic.

"That afternoon," Joan said, "I picked up one of the aquariums and was holding it in both hands. I'd forgotten how heavy it was.

"Then I felt as if I was being *moved*. Not lifted or pushed, but *moved* in some positive way. The light flickered for an instant, then the feeling stopped. I was still holding the aquarium. I put it down.

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Everything seemed the same. Only it wasn't. There were *three* aquariums now."

"Three?" her husband asked.

"Yes." She looked at him as if he were far away. He waited for her to go on. "Then, this afternoon, I was here in the living room, dusting, wearing my yellow dust mitt. I had the feeling of being moved again. I went to the broom closet to put the dust mitt away—and it was there already."

"Two dust mitts?"

She laughed tensely. "Yes, two. So after I thought about it a while I went up to the attic. There was only one aquarium."

Spruance got up and went to the window. The stars seemed close in the clear black sky.

"You—and everybody else went away, and then came back," he said. "But why not me?"

Joan didn't reply. He turned quickly. She was still there, looking past him at the bright stars.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

"Oh—nothing. Well . . . actually I was thinking about the snail in the aquarium."

"The snail?"

"Yes. Remember how proud Bobby was when he'd transferred all the fish to the new tank? But then I told him he'd forgotten the snail. It was still in the old tank, hiding inside the castle."

"I remember," he said. "Bobby sure was annoyed with that snail. But then he said: 'It was just an old experiment.' And, instead of putting the snail in the new tank too, he put all the fish back in the old tank."

"Yes. He said he thought they liked it better there."

For an instant he glimpsed that world some other where (with three aquariums now, and no yellow dust mitt), empty again, abandoned after the sterile experiment. He did not dare try to glimpse the experimenter.

"It's better here," he nodded, and touched her reassuring hand.

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This is, I think, the first calculated effort to introduce the active science fiction fan *to the science fiction* reader. *Every attempted analysis of "organized fandom" that I have seen has been addressed either to a strictly fan audience or to the intellectual snob who knows nothing of s.f. and welcomes an opportunity to laugh at it. With the largest World Convention in s.f.'s history coming up at the end of August, it seems a fitting moment to present a picture of fandom addressed to the large majority of readers who know and like science fiction, but wonder why it looms so large in the life of the intensively devoted fan. There could be no more apt interpreter than Robert Bloch, whose science-fictional life has been equally divided between professional and amateur activity, and who can, therefore, entertainingly make clear to you why*

Some of My Best Fans Are Friends

by ROBERT BLOCH

ONE AFTERNOON IN THE AUTUMN OF 1939, a car pulled up at the curb in front of an eight-room house in the Kensington section of Brooklyn.

Three U. S. Treasury Department agents emerged from the automobile. With drawn revolvers, the T-Men bore down on the dwelling. It was around two o'clock in the afternoon, but the front shades of the building were drawn, as though its occupants were still asleep—as indeed they were.

But not for long. The Treasury agents rang the bell, hammered on the door, and bellowed their various equivalents of "Open in the name of the Law!"

Eventually they were admitted by two sleepy-eyed young men, who blinked in confusion when informed, "This is a raid!"

Badges gleamed impressively—and the revolvers gleamed even more impressively. In grim silence, the T-Men ransacked the house, searching methodically from basement to attic.

The neighbors, it seemed, had tipped them off. The place had been under suspicion and surveillance for some weeks now—be-

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cause of the odd comings and goings of its many occupants, because of the dearth of furnishings, and for other, still more significant reasons.

The Treasury investigators exchanged triumphant glances as they corroborated the most important rumor concerning the premises. "This is it," they said. "Look at all these printing presses and mimeograph machines. Guess our tip was right after all. You guys are counterfeiters, aren't you?" they demanded.

The two young men protested their innocence. But it took a lot of explaining to finally convince the government investigators that there was no counterfeiting going on. The explanation, while simple enough, was hardly convincing to outsiders.

The two young men were science fiction fans.

Or so the story goes, allegedly, according to historian Sam Moskowitz in his book, *The Immortal Storm*. An entire group, calling themselves the Futurians, had rented the residence for communal living: arriving and departing at all hours, holding forth over the mimeographs and presses to print up their "fan magazines." The reactions of their neighbors and of the United States Government represents one attitude.

Let us consider another. Mr. Damon Knight, well-known writer and critic, discussing science fiction conventions in an article written last year, comments as follows:

"I used to wonder what it was that gave the best con-reports their oddly religious tone. I see now there is no oddity involved—a convention is a religious event, a love-feast. Programming is merely an excuse for congregation: you get the same mystic feeling of brotherhood, and I suppose for similar reasons, as you do in a convalescent ward or a ship's company. Nearly all the mundane things that preoccupy and divide us have been temporarily left behind: we're suddenly made aware of the closeness between me and thee. This is religious or it's nothing, and God knows we need it."

And there you have it, from both sides.

Science fiction fans are an eccentric fringe-group, creatures of odd hours and odder habits, who may well be suspected of major criminal activities.

Or science fiction fans are a mystic brotherhood, linked together by transcendental bonds of the spirit.

Which interpretation is correct?

The question, perhaps, is not as trivial as it might seem to be on the surface. In an age where anthropologists devote serious study to the habit-patterns of hot-rodders, where sociologists analyze the in-group status of cool-jazz addicts, and psychiatrists dogmatically dissect the attitudes of motorcycle clubs, it is inevitable that the phe-

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nomenon of science fiction fandom merits similar attention.

A month after these lines reach print, science fiction fans will undoubtedly gain a new measure of attention, through the pages of our leading newspapers and national magazines.

The Fourteenth World Science Fiction Convention will be held at New York's Hotel Biltmore, August 31 through September 3. If past experience and present prediction holds good, there is a possibility that as many as two thousand science fiction fans will gather together, from all parts of the United States, Canada, and abroad. The event will be publicized, dramatized, and perhaps even televised.

But will a reading of press reports and magazine articles aid the average citizen's understanding of science fiction fans and fandom?

Not if the press turns Proust-like and seeks the past recaptured. Not if they follow the pattern of 1939.

It was in that year that the First World Science Fiction Convention was held. Then too the scene was New York, but the event was scheduled for the July Fourth weekend. Instead of holding forth in a major hotel, conventioneers found themselves in Caravan Hall —a meeting place tucked away on the fourth floor of a midtown office building. Overall attendance was limited to about 200, and students of economics may find significance in the fact that the banquet (at $1 a plate) was attended by only 32 people.

Nevertheless, the press was in attendance. Just as the Convention itself set a pattern for future gathering, the press coverage provided a reportorial attitude which was followed for a decade to come.

The bright young people from *Time* and *The New Yorker,* in particular, arrived on the spot, pen in hand and tongue in cheek. By statement and implication, but most of all by "slant," they conveyed to millions of their eager readers the glad tidings that science fiction fans were (by and large) a group of addled adolescents in propeller-topped beanies, given to juvenile exclamations of "Goshwowboyoboy!" as they eagerly perused the latest issues of *Buck Rogers* and *Superman* comics. Invoking the then-notorious Orson Welles *Invasion From Mars* radio broadcast, they managed to convey an impression of naive gullibility and callow enthusiasm on the part of fans. Nor did they particularly care to emphasize the "professional" aspect of the affair: this was 1939, remember, and adult writers, editors or lecturers who talked about such fantastic things as atomic energy and weapons, transcontinental rocket missiles, or space travel were generally dismissed as sensation-mongering crackpots.

It was easy to be clever and condescending—and in defense of the reporters, we must also remember

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that they had nothing else to go on. Why should several hundred people convene for the purposes of discussing the stories found in pulp magazines with lurid covers? Why should some of them travel three thousand miles to bid, in public auction, for a piece of alleged "artwork" featuring a Bug-Eyed Monster chasing a Bug-Bra'd Blonde? The Convention itself was obviously not a money-making proposition. It was not sponsored for a commercial purpose, there was no formal fraternal organization or movement behind it, and the program was definitely of, by, and for amateurs. So the simplest thing to do was to employ satire, and dismiss science fiction and science fiction fandom as "juvenile amusement."

Times have changed.

As already noted, the Conventions have grown. They have been held annually—save for a hiatus during the war years—in major American cities all over the country: the 1948 Convention took place in neighboring Toronto. Attendance, and interest, has mounted. Today it is commonplace for conventioneers to arrive from the British Isles—indeed, this year's Guest of Honor will be Arthur C. Clarke, the English author and astronomer whose best-selling *The Exploration of Space* was a Book-Of-The-Month choice a few years ago. Annual conventions are also held in Australia and in England, with American attendees frequently in evidence. In this country, regional or locally-sponsored conventions (such as the Westercon and the Midwestcon) generally attract as many fans as attended the first so-called "World" convention of 1939. Fan groups "bid" for the privilege of putting on a convention and selection of next year's site is decided by vote.

The programs are now on a formal basis, with a full-scale banquet which would do credit to any gala celebration of an Association of Morticians. In addition to speakers prominent in the arts and sciences, such programs have included productions of an original opera (with a Ray Bradbury libretto) and several ballets. In New Orleans, in 1951, Paramount rushed its advance color print of *When Worlds Collide* for a special "first" showing to a convention audience. Twentieth-Century-Fox, not to be outdone, actually rented the largest motion picture house in town and invited the entire convention group to a special premiere showing of *The Day The Earth Stood Still.*

Convention-planning and financing involves thousands of man-hours of effort and thousands of dollars of risk-capital. Today, when speakers arise to discuss new developments in atomic power and thermo-nuclear weapons or posit the progress of space-satellites, their remarks are respectfully quoted in

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the press, taped for *Monitor,* or aired direct from television studios. Editors and writers in the science fiction field have attained status, due to critical recognition, commercial success, and an enlarged and receptive audience.

At the same time, although *Superman* and *Buck Rogers* seem to have disappeared from public consciousness, the press has seen fit, wherever possible, to "tie in" science fiction with such disparate phenomena as the Shaver Mystery, the "flying saucer craze," dianetics, and—latterly—Bridey Murphy.

It remains to be seen, at this writing, if a new crop of bright young people from the national magazines will arrive on the scene of the New York Convention and again do a hatchet-job on the nearest propeller-beanie.

Actually, they won't find many propeller-beanie wearers in evidence. And presumably, the program itself will be of sufficient stature to stand dispassionate scrutiny.

But it is doubtful if the press will ever come up with the answers to the two simplest questions they have always ignored in the past—the questions which remain unanswered after all these years.

What is a science fiction fan, and what is fandom?

The distinguished social observer, Wilson Tucker, has defined a science fiction fan as follows:

"*Fan*—a follower, devotee or admirer of any sport or diversion. In this case the diversion is science and fantasy fiction. . . ."

He designates *Fandom* as "the group as a whole" and goes on to estimate that there are approximately 1000 "active" fans in the world.

But this in itself is merely a matter of labeling. Let us return to the opinion of historian Moskowitz, who writes, "In the early 1920's, then, the simple reading of a magazine like *Weird Tales* was sufficient to characterize a man as a fantasy fan, a rule which held true until at least 1930."

Thirty years ago, a fan was simply a *reader,* pure and simple. (Even some of the most ancient and hardened fans were presumably pure and simple a generation ago.)

Then, in 1926, Hugo Gernsback began to publish the first fulltime magazine devoted exclusively to science fiction—*Amazing Stories.* The reader-fan of that day was attracted to its pages. Gernsback inaugurated a "Discussions" column in which he printed letters of comment, including the names and addresses of the readers.

Inevitably, readers began to correspond with one another. In major cities such as New York, personal contact soon followed. Gradually, "clubs" were formed. The fans began to hold get-togethers, in the time-honored fashion of philatelists and model railroad buffs

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alike, and discussed their favorite literature; commented on authors and artists and editorial policy.

Within a few years, *Amazing Stories* was honored by the sincerest form of flattery, as imitators appeared in the magazine field. Now the fans had several magazines to read, and they were also discovering that science fiction *per se* was available in hard covers: the works of Wells and Verne and others became popular fare within the group. There was a growing interest and an ever-expanding body of readers with whom to correspond or establish personal contact.

By 1930, the first "fanzine" appeared—that is to say, an amateur magazine devoted to the interests of science fiction fans. Fanzines, more than anything else, served to knit fandom together in self-conscious awareness. As time went on, more and more of these publications appeared. Some of them were quite elaborate printed or offset productions. Many of them boasted contributions from the professional writers in the field. A few fans went to lavish lengths, employing colored artwork and expensive stock, and distributing their offerings to a readership of several hundred.

Content of fanzines varied from the extremely frivolous to the "serious constructive" aspects of fandom. They included editorial matter, fiction, poetry, reviews of books, magazines, radio programs, motion pictures: articles on orthodox science and unorthodox mysticism, news of fan-activity and professional circles, and—inevitably—letter-columns which in turn served to enlarge the scope of acquaintanceship amongst readers.

More "clubs" sprang up in various communities. Local get-togethers and regional conventions were sponsored throughout the 1930's, and by the time the First World Science Fiction Convention was held in '39, fandom was an amorphous reality.

There was a distinct hierarchy of "oldtime" fans (*i.e.,* elderly persons in their twenties who had been active in the field for as long as five or six years, and a few doddering ancients who claimed to have read science fiction ever since the faraway days of 1926) and already fandom had split up into groups and cliques jockeying for positions of power in the leading clubs and organizations.

Fandom had become an active microcosm, in which distinct personalities flashed and functioned. No longer could one achieve fan-status as a mere reader. Jack Speer, in his 1944 *Fancyclopedia,* says, "A real fan fulfills practically all of the following requirements: he buys and reads most of the professional fantasy magazines, collects them and writes the editors. He subscribes to at least one fan magazine. He corresponds with other

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fans. SF fandom is his ruling passion. He has probably tried his hand at writing, either for fan or pro magazines or both."

Note well that *SF* (for *science fiction*) and that *pro* (for *professional*). By 1944, the world of fandom was well ready for the publication of the above-mentioned *Fancyclopedia;* a 98-page, single-spaced volume devoted to defining the terminology and specialized slang idiom employed by fandom, and to chronicling in brief the history and biographical data of leading personalities and movements in the field.

In its pages, attorney Speer lists some of the "explanations" then current regarding motivations which led fans into fandom. Various theories had been advanced, including one that fans constituted a "separate species" of mutants; that they sought fandom in the interests of sex sublimation, escapism, idealism for a better way of life, or were attracted because they were potential scientific geniuses.

Wilson Tucker, no doubt prompted precognitively by the success of a fellow-investigator named Kinsey, decided to inaugurate a scientific survey in 1947. He distributed an elaborate questionnaire to a large group of active fans throughout the country, tabulated his findings statistically, and delivered his report in the form of a paper at the 1948 World Convention.

Recently, in 1955, a Canadian fan, Gerald A. Steward, decided to send out 1800 copies of a questionnaire similar to Tucker's, and he too has come up with an interesting statistical cross-section which does much to refute the stereotype of the science fiction fan as a beanie-nighted adolescent with a zap-gun.

Skimming off the top we discover that the average age of science fiction fans is a mature 25.8 years. The majority are over 20. Males outnumber females 4 to 1, but the percentage of women fans seems to be on the increase. 78% of them correspond with other fans, over 60% of them have attended at least one convention, and over 60% have had material published in fanzines. Incidentally, the number of different fanzine titles mentioned in this report reached the somewhat staggering total of 292.

Fandom, as a group, seemed well-educated and above the average in intelligence. Nor did the average fan seem to be a fanatically single-minded hobbyist. Almost 75% of the fans answering the survey questions owned record players and claimed music as an interest: 98% owned libraries—and not necessarily collections devoted exclusively to science fiction.

On the face of the evidence, then, it would appear that the science fiction fan is not a "type." There is no reason to ask "What kind of people become science fic-

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tion fans?" because the answer is obviously, "All kinds," One might as well ask, "What kind of people become bowlers?" Young and old, rich and poor, doctors, lawyers, merchants, Ph.D.s, scientists and working stiffs. Today it is not unusual to find a large readership of science fiction magazines and books in places like White Sands and Los Alamos, or the faculties of leading universities and technical schools. That is not to say, by any means, that the teen-ager has vanished from science fiction circles or attendance at conventions; or that some of the exaggerated attitudes and boisterous behavior-patterns typical of all teen-agers are not in evidence.

But the activities of the youthful fans are no more wholly representative of fandom and fan conventions than the activities of the omnipresent adult "cut-ups" who attend conventions of all sorts. The Shrine, the Legion, our civic, fraternal, business and political groups have, as we all know, their share of the convivial and the overconvivial. Our major political parties are not characterized and caricatured in the public mind by the juvenile antics of delegates on the floor (sometimes literally) at national presidential conventions. Nor are the tirades and unreasoning outbursts of individual politicos deemed representative of the group as a whole. Similarly, it would be a mistake to concentrate on such manifestations in science fiction gatherings. Fans do attend the traditional convention Masquerade Ball in outlandish costumes: but so, I submit, do members of the Rotary Club. Fans also "rib" one another in fanzines, and on the convention floor, and at banquets—but so does the sober-sided business man in his trade papers, his industrial association meetings, and his stag smokers.

There are, of course, the inevitable fringe-elements. Some of the younger fans have not yet emerged from the "science fiction movie" stage of appreciation. Some fans are enthusiastic about reincarnation, ESP orgone therapy, and metaphysical cults. But percentage-wise they're in the minority. And thousands upon thousands of *non*-fans maintain an equal interest in such matters.

Indeed, what is significant about fandom's attitude towards scientific, parapsychological and theological theories is the comparative degree of *open-mindedness* evinced by most fans. For every outstanding (or outscreaming) fanatic, there are dozens of reasonably impartial observers. Fans are more apt to be receptive to new ideas: they know that many of the concepts which have become accepted realities today were laughed at ten years ago by unthinking laymen and orthodox scientists alike. For this reason, fans *per se* have a greater respect for intellectual curi-

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osity, and a lesser respect for self-constituted "authority"—even when that authority is unorthodox. Most of the dogmatically devout believers in hypnotic regression or visitors from Venus are found among those who have read little or no other imaginative fiction. But the majority of fans adopt a "wait and see" attitude towards every new concept that comes along; they realize that ideas, like fans themselves, have a way of growing up—or disappearing forever.

Let it be hastily added, however, that this is no apologia for fandom: no attempt to paint a picture of a dedicated group of super-intelligentsia. Fandom *is* a microcosm, and like every world it offers a wide variation of activity and attitude ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous. For proof

Mother is the invention of necessity

of this it is only necessary to open the pages of a fan magazine and encounter, in the middle of a story or article, an abrupt interlineation such as the one you have just noted above. *Linos,* as they are called, are a fannish craze, and pop up in most publications. They take the form of quotes or quasi-quotes from stories, letters, or on-the-spot remarks made by fans or professionals in the field, and part of their charm seems to be their odd irrelevancy when printed out-of-context. Fans go to great lengths to outdo one another in their choice of linos. Childish? Perhaps. But remember that mingling of the sublime and the ridiculous. The particular example just given comes from *A Bas,* a Canadian fanzine, and appeared in an issue featuring a handsome full-color cover reproduction of a de Chirico painting. The "lino" which follows is extracted from *Hyphen,* which

"It sounds vaguely obscene . . .

is published in Belfast, and was cunningly broken up to extend over three separate pages.

Anyone who dips into an assortment of typical fanzines will find a bewildering array of neologisms and "running gags." He will learn the distinction between *actifans* (a portmanteau word which means just what you might suspect) and *fake-fans* (a term of mild contempt directed at those harmless parasites who hang around the fringes, reading but never writing for fanzines, attending conventions but seldom participating in the program or in the social activities). He will also encounter the *neo-fan* (a newcomer to the field) and the *insurgents* (the fun-loving crowd, who often delight in baiting those who take their hobby more seriously). And he'll read references to the dear departed—those who

". . . and if there's anything I detest . . .

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have gone *gafia*. The latter word is an abbreviation of *Getting Away From It All:* a common excuse given for dropping out of activity on a temporary or permanent basis.

He will learn that when a group of fans get together in the vicinity of a mimeograph machine, they are apt to turn out a *one-shot*—that is to say, a special fanzine commemorating the occasion, with no further issues intended. This is often done for purposes of *egoboo*

". . . it's vagueness."

(ego-boosting activity). On the other hand, most fanzines may appear at more or less regular intervals, enjoy a life-span of some years, and circulate to several hundred subscribers. The leading fan Amateur Press societies—FAPA (Fantasy Amateur Press Association), NFFF (National Fantasy Fan Federation), SAPS (Spectator Amateur Press Society) and OMPA (Off-Trail Magazine Publishers Association)—are formally organized with elected officers, a constitution, regular dues-paying membership, and all the trimmings.

As is the case with local fanclubs, a certain group enjoys "political activity" and campaigns for positions of leadership in these organizations. Inevitably, "feuds" break out over matters of policy. At times these "Feuds" degenerate to the personal level. Those interested in the phenomenon of power-politics and strategy are advised to seek further details in the pages of Machiavelli or Moskowitz—whose aforementioned *The Immortal Storm* constitutes a detailed account of science fiction fandom's early years, with special emphasis on *geopolitik*.

The fledgling fanzine-reader will learn that fandom is shot through with references to facetious cults centering around the worship of *Foo, Ghu, Roscoe,* or *Bheer*. This self-ridiculing aspect of fandom is at once one of its healthiest aspects and one of its most misleading.

It is a good thing that fandom, in the main refuses to take itself too seriously—but the outsider, noting continual references to such obscurantisms as *Yngvi, Courtney,* and *sensitive fannish faces* may accept such apparent preoccupations at their face value—or accept some of the amateur artwork at its defaced value—and form erroneous opinions concerning the field.

Observers will note such crazes as the sending out of *quote-cards*—linos typed up on cards and circulated between correspondents for the purpose of acquiring signatures and autographs—and wonder why anyone would bother sending out a quotation to the effect that "Mad dogs are kneeing me in the groin." They will observe that from time to time some self-styled wag will perpetrate a hoax by spreading a rumor concerning a fan or a professional; fandom has its share of practical jokers, even though they

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are not organized into a Forty-And-Eight Society.

Finally, the outsider will take cognizance of an oft-repeated observation to the effect that, "If all organized fandom dropped dead tomorrow (*which God forbid*)* the circulation of the major professional science fiction magazines would not be seriously affected."

This, however, is only part of the story—just as fanzines and fan activity (*Fanac*) are only a part of the totality which is fandom. One of the most interesting aspects of fandom lies in its continuity, and the results thereof. A surprising proportion of fans who were active back in the 1930's are still in the field today. Many of the beardless youths who participated in the 1939 Convention will be prominent at the 1955 affair. A truly overwhelming percentage utilized the hobby as a springboard to a professional career in the science fiction field.

Most of the editors and agents, all of the specialized publishers, a good share of the artists, and many of the writers fall into this category. They were amateurs, learning their craft in fanzines and fan activities, and just "grew up" with the field.

But aside from the possibility of finding a lifetime career in science fiction, what holds fans and fandom together? What is the spiritual library paste, the psychic glue, the emotional welding-job which assembles such a motley and *bon motley* crew under the fannish banner or manner?

Is it a "love of science fiction"?

Perhaps. But there are self-professed or self-confessed fans who don't *read* it. And the field swarms with critics and cliques: one would be hard put to find a single fan of stature who admits to reading and enjoying more than a few magazines or a select list of authors.

Nor do I hold to the disparate beliefs that fans are either "star-begotten" supermen or maladjusted pariahs. Fandom, despite its plethora of pointed remarks and heads to match, is not a Race Apart. And notwithstanding its neurotics, psychotics, erotics and exotics, fandom contains no more than the standard 90% of screwballs who bounce up and down as they read the sports pages of the daily newspapers.

If fandom has a single distinguishing characteristic, it is that of *articulacy*.

Fans are people who feel an unusual *need to communicate*. They love to talk. When they can't talk they write, and when they can't write they make tape recordings.

Fandom is more yammer than glamor. The need for self-expression, the need for an audience, is the *raison d'être* of fandom, with science fiction as the thin excuse for a focal point of presumably mutual interest.

In the light of this interpretation, perhaps the phenomenon of fan-

*AMEN—A.B.

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dom becomes a bit more intelligible.

Fandom is not, in my opinion, either a "way of life" or a "goddam hobby"—although it has been seriously characterized as both.

Debunkers are fond of pointing out that some people become "disenchanted" with fans and forsake the field after writing bitter denunciations. They cite the case of a highly intelligent and prominent fan named Francis T. Laney, who delivered a blast in the form of a manuscript entitled *Ah, Sweet Idiocy!* and thereupon vanished from the scene.

Holders of the opposite view will parry with the story of Lee Hoffman, who entered fandom under that name and was presumed to be male, but who turned out to be definitely and irrefutably a female of the species when she showed up at the New Orleans Convention. Lee was a BNF (Big Name Fan) for several years until she too presumably wearied of fandom and disappeared. She reappeared, however, in 1955, at Cleveland, and six months later she was actively publishing, to say nothing of taking a trip abroad to attend the British Convention. Moreover, she married professional science fiction magazine editor Larry Shaw—and if that isn't making fandom a way of life, I'd like to find a better example!

Still, I hold my original conclusion, in the main. I'd prefer to regard fandom as a way of self-dramatization, or rather, a stage on which to enact a variety of self-dramatizations.

If we take this view, it is possible for us to observe the confusing actions and reactions of fans in a different manner. We can assign various roles to individuals and resort to a sort of type-casting. All we must remember is that fans are actors.

To begin with, we have the *Elder Statesmen*. In this characterization we find such (if you'll pardon the expression) crotchety old fogies as myself. Defensively aware of the age-gap separating us from the main body, we seek to translate senility into seniority and "philosophize" upon fandom like so many Oswald Spenglers.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, of course, are the *Young Geniuses,* forever reiterating their own precocity and insisting that the time has come for Youth to take the helm. These are the youngsters who constantly worry because the "pros" have "taken over" the Conventions: who are afraid that fandom has become "commercialized." This concept, by the way, is totally false: professional editors and publishers donate far more to Convention auctions than they could possibly hope to gain by a few sales of books on the floor, and professional writers as a group have been generous with their time and effort in support of Convention

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programs as participants. But there is a certain juvenile element that resents this apparent "domination" and chooses to dramatize itself as insurgent.

Of course we also have the *Crusaders*. As was the case during the actual historic Crusades, these come in all sizes, shapes and cruciforms. They are the critics who seek amongst fanzines and prozines, who campaign for "more accent on pure science" in the literature, who abjure and abhor and demur and deplore. Fandom, to them, is a soapbox.

Still another group is the *Laughing Hyenas*—those who refuse to take any aspect of fandom seriously, including their own participation. To some of them, fan activity is just social activity—or antisocial activity. They fight the *Crusaders,* particularly the "Serious Constructive Element" or those who wish to Clean Up Fandom by eliminating all references to s-x (or even to words like *eliminating*). Another group of *Hyenas* concentrates on brightening the pages of fan magazines with humorous articles, cartoons, and fannish gags. They clown at conventions and many a young fan bent on distinguishing himself has elected the role of *raconteur*.

Naturally, there is a counter-*raconteur* reaction. The *Serious Constructive Fan* alluded to above rises in all his dignity against indignity. He is usually Literary and often Scientific as well, and his efforts are designed to Uplift the Field. He calls our attention to the Big Picture and abominates the cartoon. He is always asking for more articles on Space Flight.

Opposed to objectivity is the *Rousseauphile*. He is science fiction's answer to *True Confessions*. He utilizes the pages of letter-columns and fan magazines to write about himself and his own exploits: often his Pepys' Diary does not concern science fiction at all, even though its revelations may concern less forthright readers. He is an outright exhibitionist, but so are they all.

Actors. Hams, basted in the juice of fantasy.

And yet—

Are the types so uncommon? Aren't the woods full of self-elected old fogy types lecturing at the youngsters—and rebellious youths, contemptuous of their elders—and earnest reformers—and earnest non-conformers—and deadly souls bent on becoming the life of the party—and serious thinkers or stinkers—and people who describe their intimate lives and gossip and brag and bore you with vacuous detail?

Science fiction fans are *people*: a variegated assortment, a joyful cross-section with only one least common denominator—articulacy.

Theirs is the desire and the need to communicate common to all humanity, plus one added factor: a

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more than ordinary *ability* to do so.

How else to explain the mad mingling of types and traits under one raised roof? How else to explain the time, money and effort spent in editing, publishing, distributing, writing for and reading fan magazines? How else to explain the enduring devotion of a generation to a minor hobby? How else to explain the lasting friendships and associations formed so frequently in the field? How else to explain the incredible and often completely unrewarded expenditure of energy which results in a Science Fiction Convention? How else to explain why mature and oft-times distinguished adults cross continents or oceans to attend them?

I have before me, as I write, a letter from one of those men, who remarks:

"What a happy life we could lead forming a basic nucleus of True Conventioneers and touring the country covering every single one!"

The author of these sentiments? A Mr. Anthony Boucher.

To him, to myself, and to thousands of others, science fiction fandom is neither an abstract sociological phenomenon, a minor psychological aberration, a mystic cult, a commercialized hobby, or a petty preoccupation. It is a curious combination of cause and effect, and to those of us who enjoy it, definition is difficult.

My own answer to the question, "What is fandom?" is simply this —*friendship, based on mutual interests.*

No one could ask for more.

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Reminder: to register for next month's World Convention in New York, send $2 to the World Science Fiction Society, Box 272, Radio City Station, New York 19. See you there! — A. B.

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WARNING: *Despite the by-line, this is not a humorous story — far from it. "I have wondered," R. Bretnor once wrote me, "why more stories aren't written about the extrasensory perceptions as they apparently actually are, with the influences they might have on the lives of those who possess them": and here he explores that theme in one of the most realistic and probable stories of ESP. Mrs. Emily Molbert, with her wisps of psi-faculties and her need for power, might, in an earlier civilization, have been dreaded as a "witch." We can now explain her to our own satisfaction without reference to witchcraft; but the dread remains. . . .*

The Past and Its Dead People

by R. BRETNOR

WHEN DR. FLITTER CAME INTO THE room, it seemed as though the past and its dead people came in with him, clinging to him like stale surgery smells, like the cold sweat of ancient autopsies. He would come in, his moving bones tight in their tailored shrouds of thin, gray flesh and stiffly pressed brown cloth. He would cross the big Turkey carpet to his chair, dropping frayed bedside courtesies much as a tired cleaning woman at the day's dark end drops her concealing dust-rag on a stain.

He was a perfect gentleman. That was what Mrs. Weatherbleak herself had said when she first rented him Judge Ullbright's room. So, every evening after supper, when her *nice* boarders came down into the parlor for an hour or two, he was admitted to their company. He was admitted to the treaty by which they lived. Even after the television set had been turned on, when laughter and the posturings on its screen showed him withdrawn into the past which was a part of him, the others there betrayed no interest, carefully.

Mrs. Emily Molbert thought this strange. Each evening, alone at her end of the red davenport, fingering her bangles and her necklaces, she smiled and let her tongue click its discreet resentment against her teeth, while her eyes, two hungry stones in the seamed kewpie face below her blondined hair, turned warily to watch him and to probe

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and probe the sealed wound of his privacy.

What his past was, who its dead people were, she did not know; her second sight was not as keen as that. But she had recognized it instantly, on the first evening of his residence, when he was introduced to all of them. Breathless, hugging her treasure to her, she had heard Mr. Hiram Puny snicker nervously, and cough to cover it. She had seen Mrs. Puny working her little hands against her knees. She had observed Miss Luckmeyer, shivering, draw closer to George Giele on the bamboo love seat by the fireplace. And she had waited, knowing that each had felt what she herself had seen, until the doctor took his leave, until the door was closed.

Then Mrs. Weatherbleak, shaping the powdered creases of her face into a smile, exclaimed, "How nice it's going to be for all of us, having the Doctor here, almost as if the poor Judge was back again. You don't find many gentlemen like them, not nowadays."

Everyone smiled and nodded back at her, paying tribute to her social acumen; and Mrs. Emily Molbert snatched at the opportunity.

She leaned a little forward; her beads and bangles clicked excitedly.

"Now I just *wonder*," she said into the air.

She listened to the furniture transform their first reaction into sound, into the squeaking protest of bamboo, the consumptive gasp of Mrs. Weatherbleak's high-crowned chair, the cry of springs crushed under worn velour. She felt the quick, converging pressure of their eyes.

Mrs. Weatherbleak's smile tightened at either end. "Why, Mrs. Molbert, dear, what *do* you mean?"

And Mrs. Emily Molbert's thin, flat voice flapped through the room.

"What do I *mean?* I mean you just can't tell, that's all. That is, about *people*. Oh, I'm not saying he isn't perfectly all right. It's not for me to judge. But I do think there's something *odd* about him." Between each sentence, her tongue flicked forward at them, like a bird's. "I had a neighbor once who was like that. A Mr. Bauer, he said his name was, living right there in Long Beach, next door to us. You would've thought he was as nice a man as you could wish to meet. That's what my husband said, and all the neighbors too. But *I* could tell. I could see he was hiding something right away. And afterward they all agreed how right I was, because it wasn't his real name at all, and he was wanted by the police for something *dreadful*—something I wouldn't even talk about—back in St. Louis, I think it was."

She stopped. They looked at her. She felt their sudden malice thrusting out, to isolate her, to guard against their own awareness of what she had laid bare.

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Mrs. Weatherbleak's smile had dropped away, leaving her mouth a puckered plum afloat on curds of flesh. Moving her head slowly forward, she said, "Now, *dear,* we mustn't start imagining things. You're just upset. We all know Dr. Flitter comes from a fine old family, and that he's had some wonderful experiences, living down in Australia all those years. Anyway, San Diego isn't like Long Beach, *dear,* where you can't tell who you'll get."

"How well we know it, Mrs. Weatherbleak." At their end of the red davenport, Mrs. Hiram Puny nodded and sniffed. "It was those Long Beach men who cheated us when Mr. Puny was in real estate. But I'm sure that Dr. Flitter isn't at all like that. I'm sure he's very nice."

"Hey," Mr. Puny said. "That's right. You bet."

Miss Luckmeyer, who taught music at the Junior High School, seemed interested in Mrs. Emily Molbert's thighs. Almost, but not quite, loosening the skein of discipline that held her face, she stared at them, touching caressing fingers to her own, touching their private opulence in a contemptuous comparison. "I think I get it," she announced. "The doctor's cultured. He's got an education. That makes him a suspicious character—a pervert, probably. My God!"

Mrs. Weatherbleak tittered coyly. George Giele, guffawing, suggested that maybe in Australia the doctor had run a big abortion mill for kangaroos. Mrs. Hiram Puny, with a squeal, hastily put her fingers in her ears.

And Mrs. Emily Molbert, missing none of this, embraced her disappointment angrily, and grinned at them. *I'm every bit as good as they,* she told herself, *at least I'm a married woman, the dirty bitch-bitch-bitch, that is too what she is, and anyhow she'll never find a man who'll leave her fixed for life like my LaVern did me, so there!* She thought of her brother, the chiropractor, doing more real good than all those doctors did, making just as good money too. *All right, then, go ahead, be against me.* She grinned at them. *You take your precious doctor, see if I care, you'll find out for yourselves, oh yes you will, and then we'll see—*

"It would be *such* a shame," said Mrs. Weatherbleak, refabricating a section of her smile, "if anything should happen so our little group couldn't all meet down here the way we have. We're such good friends, we mustn't spoil it."

"No, indeed," clucked Mrs. Hiram Puny. "Live and let live, I always say."

For a moment only, Mrs. Emily Molbert grinned at the cold threat of their exclusion, their mirror to reflect her emptiness. Abruptly, she bit her lip. The words came from her like moth cadavers spilling from a lamp. "I—I didn't mean that

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he was shady, or—or anything. Why, I'd be simply the last person to say that, even if I couldn't tell what a fine man he was as well as anybody. I guess I thought there'd been, well, maybe a sorrow in his life. My goodness, I was just *wondering,* that's all."

She finished. There was quiet. Each stick of furniture let out its sudden sigh.

"I'm *so* glad you explained, *dear.*" Mrs. Weatherbleak, wheezing, beamed at everyone. "It simply goes to show—we must express ourselves more *clearly,* mustn't we?"

After that, Mrs. Emily Molbert had kept her speculations to herself, nourishing them behind a palisade of nods and smiles and simpering pliancy. It was like when she used to stay with LaVern's ma, she told herself; the people here were every bit the same. Each evening in the parlor, assaying their residuum of antipathy, she postured, flattered, agreed with all of them, and sucked the warming thought that someday *they'd* be sorry, just wouldn't they.

Meanwhile, she was not idle. Wherever Dr. Flitter walked, the past and its dead people went with him; and now, at every opportunity, her path crossed theirs. Sometimes, when his door was open and Marilene, the maid, was making up his bed, she would stop democratically to pass the time of day, to let her eyes feed on the twisted coverlet, the scattered books, and the few mismated toilet articles on the bare bureau. More often, when the door was closed, she paused, holding her breath, on tiptoe lest he hear, to read his thumbtacked card: EDMUND FLITTER, M.D., with (*no longer practicing*) heavily pencilled underneath. And sometimes, when he took his walk up Laurel Street over Cabrillo Bridge into the park, discreetly and at a distance she followed him.

The autumn months moved by; and Mrs. Emily Molbert, at least once a day, impatiently took inventory of her gains. They were not many. Her covert sifting of the morning mail had brought no great reward—one letter from New Zealand, from Dunedin, too thick for her to hold against the light, addressed to him in an untidy spiderweb of ink, printed up in its corner with the names of BAXTER & MORDECAI, SOLICITORS. And all the rest of her researches had given not much more. He walked into the park. Always alone, he sat upon a bench, staring for hours through the squawking gulls who circled down to scavenge at his feet. Occasionally, as he returned, he stopped in at the liquor store. At rare intervals, he went downtown to the National Bank.

These were the things he did, not normal things like going to shows, or over to Coronado for the

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day, or even to the dog track like LaVern. At night, she guessed, he holed up in his room, secretly drinking, reading his odd books—*Jude the Obscure, The Light of Asia, A Guide to Queensland and to New South Wales*. Once, greatly daring, first making sure that no one was around, she had bent quickly to the keyhole of his door—and he was sitting there, bowed in his darkness against the window frame. And she had seen, as always, that he was not alone.

The thinning autumn cooled. The sloven chill of southern winter came, went, and came again. It dragged a dirty sky across the town for Christmas and New Year's—a sky that sagged and stayed, dribbling down endlessly through the sad branches of the palms.

Those January afternoons were times of trial for Mrs. Emily Molbert. She spent them in her room, garbed in the bridal pink of pompom slippers and nylon negligee, starting to rearrange the smaller things she owned, starting to fix her hair some smart new way, opening and closing dressing-table drawers, stopping before her mirror to flirt and smile and snatch its momentary echo of assurance.

Even her radio, crooning, chattering, caressing her with oleaginous commercials, could not entice her from her own distraction. Right now, downstairs (she would feel sure) Mr. and Mrs. Hiram Puny sat in the parlor with Mrs. Weatherbleak, talking about her maybe, or watching the TV. And like as not *he* was down there with them, hiding whatever awful thing he had to hide, and sort of laughing at her secretly because the others wouldn't let her find it out.

Then, at the thought, she would look suddenly at buttons, brooches, bracelets, strings of beads, half-sorted on the bed; sweep them together, tangle them, thrust them into their bags and cardboard boxes; get up and quickly walk across the room; sit at the mirror, coyly tilt her head, exchanging grins and nods and confidences.

In all that time, she hadn't learned a thing; it was unfair, and it was *their* fault, too—protecting him. (She would turn languidly, raising her left hand, posing its fingers to display their rings.) Well, *they'*d find out. Even when she was just a little girl, she'd seen things other people couldn't see. Hadn't that woman preacher at the Message Chapel in Santa Monica told her she could be real psychic if she studied to? (Here she would laugh conspiratorially.) They just weren't fooling her one bit. That Luckmeyer thing, with her big words, the bitch, the dirty bitch, and her big hot behind. And Mrs. Weatherbleak, the fat old nasty *pig*. Oh, they were up to something, the both of them, pretending to be extra nice to her the last few days, trying to trap her into saying something she oughtn't to, looking for

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an excuse to close the parlor to her evenings, or even make her pack her trunk and move. (At this, her hand, forgotten suddenly, would clutch unguided at lipstick, perfume, rouge; and she would daub it on.) Just let them try, was all. She could show both of them a thing or two—oh, yes, she could. . . .

It was on such an afternoon, at half past three, that Mrs. Weatherbleak knocked gently at her door. She recognized the knock. She sat up, hand halted in mid-air, hastily reassuming her brittle armor of gentility. "Yes?" she called out. "Who is there?"

"It's me, dear—Mrs. Weatherbleak. You aren't too busy, dear?"

There was a pause while Mrs. Emily Molbert's mirrored image showed its teeth, before she turned her head. "Well, goodness—well, just a minute, then."

She moved the objects on the dressing table back and forth. She crossed the room to snap and snap again the fastenings of her trunk, to turn the radio down. She threw her flower-embroidered, long-fringed Chinese shawl over the bedspread; twitched its sleek surface straight. At last, daring to wait no longer, she unlatched the door. "I didn't mean to keep you such a time. It's just there always seems so much to do. But do come in. I was just saying to myself how I'd like company—"

Mrs. Weatherbleak entered, still puffing from the stairs, wearing her Sunday smile, clucking apology; and Mrs. Emily Molbert, between their words, fussed her into the big upholstered chair; then primly, daintily, sat down herself on the hard-cushioned dressing table stool, where she could press her knees together bone to bone, and feel the mirror's cold encouragement behind her back.

Their talk was light and back-and-forth at first, about the weather, about how Mrs. Weatherbleak had owned a lovely shawl like that, only not so big and with a dragon on it instead of flowers . . . and Mrs. Molbert waited, tense for whatever menace lay beneath, small, subtle, fanged.

It had been weeks, said Mrs. Weatherbleak, since they had had a real good visit by themselves, now hadn't it? In her position, there were so *many* things to think about; why, every time she turned around, it seemed, the cook was wasting perfectly good food, or one of those two boys up on the third floor had brought a woman in—not that *she* interfered in people's lives; it was their business what they did, unless there were complaints; she always tried to look the other way, and not to judge, if they were just *discreet* . . .

She paused. The bar-pin on her bosom tossed and quaked. Her giggle came, metallic, moistureless.

" . . . dis*creet*," she giggled,

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"well, like Miss Luckmeyer is—"

She stopped; the parched sound ceased; her eyes, small in their creased and powdered nests, went wide. "Oh, *my!*" she said, touching a finger to her truant lips. "I shouldn't have said *that.*" And then she snickered. "But I know *you* won't say a word about it, will you, dear?"

She had revealed no secret scandal, nothing which was not common knowledge in the house. But she herself had breached the covenant, tearing a way through all its silences. This was no accident; this was no careless slip of cautious tongue—

Oh no, oh no, oh no—

For just an instant, unbelievingly, Mrs. Emily Molbert's body refused to breathe, straitjacketing her lungs convulsively in its cruel cage, letting her hands clutch in like claws upon themselves. Then it released her. Gasping, she echoed the dry giggle with her own. "I—I *never* would of dreamed it!" she exclaimed. "I never would. Why, he's a married man, even if that wife of his does stay back East. My goodness me!" Her head came jerking forward on its neck. "But don't you worry, Mrs. Weatherbleak. I'll keep it to myself. You can trust *me.*"

"Dear, I *know* I can. I'm a good judge of human nature too, even if sometimes I can't say all I think—in my position, dear. And that's why I came up. I knew *you'd* understand." She sighed. "I try not to complain. I wouldn't even now if it was just those boys, because their class of people aren't worth troubling with—I'd as soon tell them to pack their things as look at them. But it's more than that—" She leaned a little forward in the chair; she darted a precautionary glance toward the door; she let her voice drop confidentially. "It's more than that. *It's Dr. Flitter, dear.*"

The words hung there between them, ripe peaches, pearls. Above, around them, silence spread its wings, its invitation into throbbing darknesses where, an ice-gray dagger safe to the hungry hand, all terror lay.

Mrs. Molbert trembled; tightly as any trembling lover, she hugged herself. Now she was armed against him, against them all. She made her mouth a circle of surprise. "I can't *believe* it," she cried out. "I mean, he's such a *perfect gentleman.*"

Hastily, Mrs. Weatherbleak twitched back her slipping mask of friendliness. "You're quite right, dear. That's what he *seems* to be. And you're like me—you just can't bring yourself to think the worst of anyone, even if you've seen through them all along. It's very sweet of you, it really is. But there are times—" She shook her head. "—when we don't dare close our eyes to things, much as we'd like to, dear. When people start in act-

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ing *queerly* . . .—well, it's better to find out about them, isn't it?"

Mrs. Emily Molbert experienced two temptations—to thrust again, or to learn at once what lay behind all this, what had occurred. The second was the stronger. She left her place, came tripping to the bed, saying, "Goodness me, one does have to *protect* oneself, especially nowadays"; and, sitting down a cozy arm's-length from Mrs. Weatherbleak, she let her naked eagerness expose itself. "So he's been acting *queer*—imagine that! *Wh-what has he done?*"

Mrs. Weatherbleak reached out an udder of a hand to pat her knee. "It isn't so much what he's done as just the way he's been behaving, dear—"

Then, her voice sugar-coated, intimate, she went on to relate how Dr. Flitter sat in his room at night, all by himself and in the dark, thinking she didn't even dare to guess what kind of thoughts, and —well, that simply wasn't *natural,* was it now? Also, right in the parlor with the rest of them, when the TV was on with a Jack Benny show or something good like that, he'd act like he was looking *through* it at—at something else; why, even poor Mr. Puny'd noticed it. And he was so secretive, too, never saying a word about himself, at least about his past. And then there was the time when Mrs. Puny, waking up, had gone out to the bathroom in her dressing gown, and found him in the hall, just sort of *lurking* there. And—

Mrs. Molbert listened as though it all were fresh and new to her. On tenterhooks, she waited for the clue, the item of significant intelligence which would illuminate the rest.

Finally, Mrs. Weatherbleak said that that was all. "Except one thing," she said, "and really, dear, I hate to mention it. I mean, because money isn't everything, especially here, where we're such good friends. But you see, dear, along about November the doctor started falling way behind, until he owed me almost for six weeks. It wasn't until Christmas he paid up. And now *again*." There was a momentary hardening of her mouth; her eyes were button-bright. "Not that I *care,*" she said. "Why, even now I'd never mention it if Mr. Giele's friend down at the bank hadn't told about his account being closed, and if it hadn't been for all those other things. Maybe he's having money troubles, or maybe he's simply spending it as fast as it comes in. I just don't know. But it's a bad sign, dear; it always is."

"How right you are!" Mrs. Emily Molbert cried. "It's the *first* sign. You just can't be too careful from now on, his money coming from abroad like that, and his being practically a foreigner. And if he's not *responsible*—well, you can't tell *what* he'll do. Believe me, these

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doctors are the worst of all when they go wrong. I saw a movie once—"

Mrs. Weatherbleak interrupted her, patting her knee again. "I know *exactly* what you mean. Don't think I haven't thought of it. They can buy morphone and all kinds of things, and poison too; and once when Marilene was fixing up his room she saw that little bag of his left open, and—dear, I'd never talk to anyone but you like this—inside was a *syringe*." She paused an instant, observing the effect. "Well, you can just imagine how I feel, with the whole house to think about, and all my dearest friends right on the same floor with him. Of course, I'm not suggesting he's an *addict,* or anything like that. But there's something in his past, dear, just as you pointed out—something he wants to hide. And, as you said, we must protect ourselves. So that's one reason I dropped by to see you, dear, because you're such a judge of character, and *notice* things. I wondered if . . .?"

She stopped, cocking her head, leaving the question tempting, incomplete.

The point of Mrs. Molbert's tongue flicked slyly out. *The nerve of her,* she thought, *the dirty old fat pig, the nerve, after how she treated me, like trash, that's how—you think I'll tell you anything, you fat old pig?—not me, not till I'm good and ready, ha-ha-ha, maybe not even then—you can just sweat—but I'll find out about him, yes I will!* She smirked. She rose. "I've noticed several things," she said aloud. "Of course I have. But I don't think I really ought to say *right now.* Until we know some more, that is. Until we're *sure.*"

Betraying just a touch of self-control, Mrs. Weatherbleak hoisted her velvet bulk out of the chair. "Well, *dear,* I'm sure that you know best. And we can talk about it all some other time, when you're ready, dear. I'd be the last person to ask you to say anything you might feel sorry for."

In profile, hand on pink nylon hip, Mrs. Emily Molbert smiled mysteriously. "Now, don't you worry, Mrs. Weatherbleak," she whispered. "People like that get just what they deserve. I *know.* When the time comes, I'll help you all I can, I really will."

After that, Mrs. Weatherbleak said that their little talk had done her *so* much good, and it was nice to know that she had someone in the house to turn to, someone who understood, and they must have another visit very soon.

They parted in a cloud of mutual compliments; and, having closed the door, Mrs. Molbert stood there close to it until the heavy footsteps had turned off down the hall onto the stairs.

Then, darting to the bed, she snatched her Chinese shawl, swirled it around her. One shoul-

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der high, she minced across the room, swaying her hips, dancing a step or two. She stopped before the mirror. Pushing her pelvis forward, lifting a corner of the shawl seductively, she struck a pose. Over her shining triumph of embroidered flowers, over her sudden wealth, she grinned and grinned.

When Dr. Flitter came into a room, it seemed as though the past and its dead people came in with him, surrounding him invisibly, constraining his attention to themselves. It was as though some cunning coroner had cut a sickly segment from the corpse of time, kept it like chicken-tissue half alive, grafted it to him indissolubly—a private Resurrection Day, a day without a nightfall or a dawn, full of the discourse of old agonies, full of dead deeds which walked, and could not die, and cried to be undone.

He would come in, stretched pale skin fitting the narrow framework of his skull with none to spare, thin graying hair brushed flat, precise brown suit moved by his straight small bones. He would come in, into the parlor or the dining room, his vanquished eyes regarding no one there, nodding his head in short, sharp, clockwork nods. "Good *even*ing," he would say, "good *even*ing," sounding the word as if it were a verb. "I hope your back is better, Mrs. Puny? I'm sure it will be. Yes, of course it will." He would sit down among them, unaware of any change in their relationship, of the converging glances that discussed the wearing threads around his tie's neat knot, or pointed out that his clean linen was not quite as clean as it had always been, or darted back and forth at fancied signs of dissipation and physical decay. He would sit down to dinner in their midst, seemingly unaware that Mrs. Emily Molbert had moved up to sit at Mrs. Weatherbleak's right hand across from him, or that the portion on his plate was somewhat smaller than it used to be.

It was not long before the general conversation passed him by. Red-necked George Giele no longer winked at him when telling an off-color doctor joke, or shouted questions at him about life expectancies. Miss Luckmeyer no longer looked to him for polite punctuating murmurs when she explained Art, Music, or Psychology. Mr. Hiram Puny ceased favoring him with tips on Loma Portal real estate, and Mrs. Puny stopped asking his advice for her sciatica.

Mrs. Weatherbleak had not confided in them, not explicitly. But they had felt the atmospheric change; they had observed how Mrs. Molbert's status had improved; hints, signs, and their shared comparisons had soon instructed them. And now they spoke to Mrs. Molbert in the hall,

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asked her opinion on questions of the day, listened attentively when she chose to tell of the fine life she had led in Long Beach before LaVern passed on. They did not mention Dr. Flitter to her—no, not yet—but, in the parlor and the dining room, they watched her watching him. Not seeing what she saw, they now no longer could deny that it was there, a shadow at the rim of consciousness, his, his alone, enclosed upon him and upon himself, taunting them all to rape its secrecy. When she addressed him, as she often did, their voices dropped, their conversations died, their eyes abandoned her and turned to him.

On these occasions, Mrs. Emily Molbert would signal her intention cleverly, smiling with teeth and lips, glancing from side to side, tapping a nail against her necklaces. She would wait quietly until silence came. Then she would speak, sending her words experimentally, like long, blind probes, into the tissues of his time, his world.

"Doctor, wasn't that just an awful case in Hollywood? You must have heard of it—the girl who killed that other girl, I mean. She did it with a knife, and now she says she can't remember anything at all, or why she did it even, and the police can't seem to find out anything, even though they've been questioning that doctor she was working for. The papers didn't say so, but Walter Winchell thinks he gave her *dope*, or hypnotized her into doing it. I thought I'd ask you, because it's interesting and you're a doctor too. Do *you* believe a doctor would do a thing like that? I mean . . ."

Or:

"My goodness me, I wish I'd done a lot of traveling, to foreign countries like you have, that is. But then I guess I've never had a *reason* to. I guess it's like LaVern used to say—people who lead a decent life where they belong don't need to go and live with foreigners, unless they've got a real good business there, of course. Anyhow, I know that I'd get homesick all the time, it being so far and all. Didn't *you*, Doctor? Didn't you ever wish you could come home?"

So she would question him; and all the others there would watch, alert for some reaction, for a clue. And he would raise his eyes, slowly, as though he could not focus them, and answer her. Pronouncing each word patiently, he would explain that he had been away; he had lost touch; he hadn't practiced medicine for several years; he had retired. Or, irritatingly, as though she hadn't asked him anything at all, he would agree with her: "Yes, Mrs. Molbert, I'm sure you must be right. Yes, I'm sure you are."

And always, then, for an exasperating shred of time, the opaque barrier to his past would thin, and

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she would see the vague, dead, faceless people moving there, and feel the ancient conflicts feeding themselves on new adversities. Then this would pass; he would be there in front of her, mocking the sudden tremor of her hands, the moist intensity of her desire. And she would have to satisfy herself on such poor substitutes as Mrs. Puny's repressed hysteric squeal, or a glimpse of George Giele tapping his forehead openly as he leaned over to whisper in Miss Luckmeyer's ear.

During those intervening weeks, the quickened pulse of her existence ebbed and flowed, like a new desert rivulet fed by uncertain springs. There were the gay, exciting afternoons when Mrs. Weatherbleak invited her to tea, listened to everything she had to say, held out her rhinestone bribes of naughty confidence, and, ponderously sly, fished for whatever secrets she might know. There were the times the Punys asked her in to sit with them, to share their albums of old photographs in the prim parlor-twilight of their room, or took her with them on their halting walks into the fringes of the Park and treated her to soda fountain lunches afterwards. And there was the occasion when George Giele and Miss Luckmeyer gave her a ride out to La Mesa in his big red car, and stopped off at a cocktail lounge, and tried to loosen up her tongue with drinks; *they* soon found out who was too smart for them because she wouldn't take a thing except a little glass of sherry wine.

But there were other days, like the brief spell right after Dr. Flitter paid his bill again, though not in full—days worm-eaten by anxiety, days when each intercepted glance carried its thinly veiled, certain sign of leagues against her, of jokes at her expense, of unseen walls rising to shut her out. Suddenly, she would *know* that they all knew she knew no more than they. Suddenly, she would *feel* the quicksand shifting of their sympathy from her to—*him*. And one night she dreamed that his rich uncle from Australia—a strangely stick-like, fierce tall man all dressed in black, with a big diamond in his tie and a great black moustache—had come to him and paid off everything; and Mrs. Weatherbleak had turned her out so he could have her room; and all their faces, as they stared at her, were cold and blank and bare; and none of them would speak to her again—

She had awakened, to find her knuckles hammering her clenched teeth, bruising themselves, bruising her dry lips. Panting, she had lain there, trapped in the nightmare's awful certainty, until the comfort of self-pity welled to set her free; and even then enough was left so that she had to rise, turn on the lights, and find an all-night station

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with hillbilly band music to listen to.

Then suddenly, on a sweet April day, the tension ceased. Her wish was answered. She received everything she had waited for.

As soon as she sat down to breakfast, she saw that something terribly important had come up. Mrs. Weatherbleak was too alert, too obviously on edge; her manner did not suit the surly hour. Twice, eyes full of meaning, she whispered how she especially wanted to see Mrs. Molbert right after they were through; and she rushed them through the meal so fast that Mrs. Puny complained because she couldn't eat her soft-boiled egg. Finally, when all the rest were safely gone, they found each other in the hall.

Like a great tortoise, gesturing secrecy, Mrs. Weatherbleak drew her head down and in. "It's Marilene," she said. "Her sister called. Told me she's got some kind of virus flu, and won't be back to work maybe for days. Of course I don't believe a word of it. Most likely she was pregnant—that kind of people are just like rabbits, dear—and tried to do away with it, and now she's ill. But anyhow it's what you might expect. To let us know just before breakfast, when—"

Mrs. Molbert tapped her foot.

"—*when*," persisted Mrs. Weatherbleak, "it was too late to get another girl, as you well know. And now I'm stuck with all her work to do, with all these rooms . . . and I was wondering if you'd help me, dear?"

Even then, Mrs. Molbert could not resist the urge to say, "Well now, I don't know how much help I'd be, because in Long Beach I never had to do much housework, really. I always used to have a woman in." Of course, she added, relishing the silent acquiescence with which Mrs. Weatherbleak received this statement, she'd help all she could, except for *nasty* work; and she made it clear that under no conditions would she touch Miss Luckmeyer's room; and Mrs. Weatherbleak assured her that she need not.

"In fact," declared Mrs. Weatherbleak, "if you could do your own, and maybe Dr. Flitter's too, that would be quite enough. You see, dear, because of my position, and with him owing me and all, I'd rather not go in myself; I think it's better, dear. That's why I'd be so much obliged to you. And anyway—"

Their glances met, embraced.

"—you're so *observant*, dear."

That was the signature. Now a new treaty was in force between them, the bond of more than their complicity, a contract of surrender, an instrument admitting dominance. Mrs. Molbert shook as she accepted it. Half fearing her good fortune, she still maintained the protocol which governs such di-

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plomacies, however great or small. Sharply she outlined her minor terms for the invasion: freedom to lock the door while working in his room; a guarantee that he would not return to come upon her without warning there; a promise that he'd never know.

Mrs. Weatherbleak hastily acceded to these demands, as though a moment lost would make the prize dissolve and disappear. She said that he'd gone out; he'd started off toward the park; now was as good a time as any. She fetched a dustpan and a broom. They went upstairs. She unlocked the door, took out the key, put it in Mrs. Molbert's hand. Then, breathing heavily, she went downstairs again to sit as sentinel out on the warm front porch, where from her rocker she could watch Laurel Street.

Mrs. Molbert closed the door behind her back. The blinds were halfway down, and April had not come into the room. She did not mind. She left the windows closed. Her nostrils sipped a mustiness suspended in the air, a nearly imaginary hint of still, stale clothing and undried shaving soap. So might the robber of a treasure-tomb have savored its dead dust, protecting it against the springtime's cleanly breath.

Quickly, she went to work. She took the crumpled flannelette pajamas, the worn-out dressing gown, and hung them up. She tossed the bed together anyhow and tugged it straight; she dabbled with her duster here and there; she flicked the broom; she pushed his slippers underneath the bed, tidied the washstand hurriedly, and then, having performed these gestures, felt free to do what she had come there for.

It took her forty minutes. He had no trunk, and there was almost nothing in his dresser drawers. But there were letters to be read, cold business records of adversity, and bank books to be looked at. And hanging in the closet were his clothes, with pockets to investigate. She looked through all of these, through the two suitcases strapped shut and pushed into the closet's darkest corner, through a loose cardboard box of magazines and shoes. She looked through them methodically, forcing her anxious fingers to put each item back exactly as it was, telling herself that even if she didn't find a thing it wouldn't really matter because neither Mrs. Weatherbleak nor any of the others need ever know, repeating the assurance and taking cold comfort in its hollowness.

And then she found it, under a leather panel inside the ancient alligator bag that held his instruments and medicines: a crushed brown envelope containing two letters from a woman, a woman's photograph in a flat silver frame, a snapshot of the woman and a

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boy sailing a toy boat in a garden pond. She sat down on his chair. Around her, all his guarded world rose into being and opened up for her.

She entered it.

She learned who his dead people were, and why they did not rest, and what it was that he had done to them. Each wisp of feeling, each edge-of-vision glimpse: the wavering, shabby threads of her clairvoyance all held true.

Some twenty minutes later, she emerged, and closed the door behind her, and went downstairs, and walked like any starveling fowl whose crop has by a miracle been filled, with a prance, and eager pecking movements of her head, and stone-sharp eyes. But when she reached the porch, where Mrs. Weatherbleak, drumming impatient fingers on the rocker's arms, awaited her, she disciplined these signs of her success. Standing there, looking down upon the powdered fat folding so suddenly into a mask of greed, she thought, *Well! just sitting there like a fat old pig, hoping I've done your dirty work, ha-ha! you wouldn't listen when I told you what kind of man he was, and you were even scared to go up in his room—"it's my position, dear," ha-ha, ha-ha!*

Mrs. Weatherbleak tried no concealment now. Her voice was coarse and loud and ravenous. "What did you *find*?"

What did I find! mocked Mrs. Molbert in her mind's privacy. *Wouldn't you like to know, you fat old thing, just wouldn't you—*

Mrs. Weatherbleak's eyes closed down to penny-slits. She leaned abruptly forward, as though the chair no longer could endure her weight. "Tell me, *dear*," she said, in a lower voice, a little nervously. "Did you find out about him? What did you find out?"

Mrs. Molbert smiled, showing all her teeth just like a movie queen. Contemptuously, she let the broom and dustpan slide to the floor between the two of them. She sat down in a chair.

Holding the smile, she said, "Why, Mrs. Weatherbleak! Surely you don't think I'd be one to *pry*?"

They stared at one another silently. Mrs. Weatherbleak sagged back into the rocker. Her lips moved, but no sound came. After a time, her glance averted to cover up the lie, she muttered that she never would have even thought a thing like that, especially about her very *dearest* friend.

And Mrs. Molbert, knowing that no one was deluded, sat still, and smiled, and deeply drank from the dark, opened vein of hatred pulsing there.

—

There are those among us who are immune to tragedy. They are pitiless where its comprehension would demand pity of them, idiot-blind to the inwardness even of its bull-ring drama. They are aware

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of others' pain only as a narcotic more and more diluted, less and less adequate to slake their thirst for pain.

Mrs. Emily Molbert was one of these. Now that she had forced her way into his world, now that she could walk with the dead people there, she saw no tragedy at all in its persistence or even in those unchangeable events which doomed it to existence while he lived. She saw no tragedy, but she saw Right and Wrong, and they were easy to identify, as easy as they always were for her. Besides, people who had a psychic gift like hers were different. They were, well, more like *instruments*. That made her duty clear. It was not just to watch. It was to teach a lesson, she told herself, that's what it was.

Her manner changed. No longer did she need to cast her questions into an underwater darkness. Now every thrust was certain; each barb was sure to sting. Now, too, she faced a new and fascinating problem: he must be made aware of her superior insight without suspecting what really had occurred, while simultaneously the others in the house had, indirectly, to be apprised of the reality.

In this she was successful. Evenings, in the parlor, when she leaned forward to speak a word to him, their faces turned into the precious shapes of envy at her knowledge, rage at her still not sharing it, and imagination's lust to conjure up some sort of substitute.

She spiced her speech with many a weighty pause, with many a glance aside. Always, she touched his world tangentially, to strike without exhibiting what she was striking at. Out of her reservoir of righteousness, she found him questions regarding those obligations which a doctor has towards his patients, his family, himself. She spoke to him about the power of life and death; about those ill-considered deeds which, once done, can never be erased; about that retribution which must inevitably, under Mosaic Law, strike the transgressor down.

Her religious tenets were obscure; as a body, they may perhaps best be described as a Cineramic heresy of Calvinism. Nevertheless, the points she chose to make struck home. That was quite obvious. Dr. Flitter ignored her no longer. It was as though, subconsciously aware that she had breached his world, he was forbidden now by common courtesy to deny her presence. He listened gravely to her, seemingly as affected by her words as he could have been by those of the most inspired theologian. He often sat beside her in the parlor, or outside on the porch; he walked with her downstairs, or through the hall. And when she spoke to him, he answered her respectfully, as if to

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pay the simple dues of comradeship.

As the days passed, Mrs. Weatherbleak and her friends learned only that something dark had happened in that surviving past with which Mrs. Emily Molbert taunted them. They learned that it was something dark with death, which he had done, which weighed upon him now eternally. They watched. Hating Mrs. Molbert, they envied her. They watched her lacerating him, making him bleed invisibly, wearing him thin. They listened to him say, "But, Mrs. Molbert, why are you sure that God is not forgiving? I find it difficult to understand." And heard her answer him, "It says right in the Bible, *an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*, that's what it says."

And Mrs. Molbert, anticipating no immediate crisis because he'd paid his bill in part again, fobbed off their tricks and hints and questionings, and settled down to relish her reward, being polite just when she wanted to, and being as overbearing as they used to be, and planning to herself how if he finally had to move away she'd let them know a little at a time.

Then, on the eleventh day, a Friday, down in the parlor after supper, something occurred which was to change all her plans. They had this wonderful news program on TV, with headline personalities right there to answer questions like why they got divorced, or about juvenile delinquency, or who was going to win the East-West game. It started with two Navy sailors who had been trapped for days in a sunken submarine, and a lady who had tried to sell a champion Boxer puppy to Sir Winston Churchill, with the nice letter she'd received; and then the man who ran the program told them in an excited voice that he had something special for them. "Down from *Ver*mont, folks," he said, "we bring you *Dr. Lionel Apperson*—"

He paused. Everyone sat still. Each head turned slowly to stare at Mrs. Molbert and at Dr. Flitter, sitting only an arm's-length from each other.

"—Dr. Lionel Apperson, who a hung jury has *again* failed to convict of the crime of *murder*."

Half to herself, half to the room at large, Mrs. Puny said, "Oh, dear, I've read aboout him. It isn't at all nice. I'm sure I'd rather look at something else."

"Nonsense," replied Mrs. Molbert firmly, "you can't just turn your back to things, not once they've happened." She peered at Dr. Flitter. He was more finely drawn than he had ever been; his lower lids hung loosely forward just a little, too tired to hold his eyes. She peered at him; her tongue flicked sharply forward once or twice; she said, "It's always better to look things in the face. *You* know that, don't you, Dr.

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Flitter? You've found that out."

And, "Yes," he answered, "yes, I suppose I have," as though he only suddenly had realized it at her words.

George Giele raised his eyebrows, but no one else said anything at all; and meanwhile the unctuous television voice kept on, explaining what they all already knew, what Dr. Lionel Apperson had done. Then, finally, "—and now, *in person*, Dr. Apperson!"

Dr. Apperson's face filled the screen, slab-sided, with too big an adam's apple, pale skin, round eyes blinking perpetually. He spoke. He admitted freely that he had killed Thomas Warren, senile, blind, bedridden, in constant, agony; that he had killed him with an overdose of morphine. But he denied that it was murder. It was intended as an act of mercy, he declared. It was his duty as a doctor and a man. He had just heard the State had given up; that he would not be tried again. He thought that this was evidence of his sincerity.

He spoke, and the unctuous voice returned to prepare the way for the commercial. Mrs. Molbert sat erect, her knees together, governing the room. She smiled at everyone. "Well," she declared, "at least he *thought* he was doing the right thing."

She saw a tremor move Dr. Flitter's bones.

"And anyhow it was an old, old man," she said, "so it's not quite so bad. Wouldn't it have been terrible if it had been a *child?*"

Mrs. Hiram Puny wrung her small hands and squealed.

And Mrs. Molbert peered into his world, seeing it clearly just like in 3-D, and saw the people there, the dead alive, doing what they had done, again, again. She caught her breath; excitement clutched her heart. Taking advantage of the burst of music that followed the commercial, she leaned towards him. "At least it wasn't any of his kin," she said, in a voice which only he could hear; and smiled. "And he was sober, too. Well, there are some things he won't have on his conscience, anyhow. I know I wouldn't want a thing like that on mine. Would *you?*"

Dr. Flitter rose. He stood there swaying; his mouth struggled silently.

Mrs. Molbert was pleasantly aware that everybody now was watching them. She licked her lips. "If I'd done anything like that," she said, "I'd cut my heart out. That's just what I'd do."

She said it loudly, clearly, so that all could hear. For an instant, Dr. Flitter stared at her. Tears formed in the open runnels of his lower lids, and flowed down over the tight skin of his cheeks. Then he found his voice. "*No,*" he cried, "*no, no, no.*"

While they watched, he stumbled from the room.

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And, as he did so, George Giele turned on her savagely. "Oh, for Christ's sake!" he shouted. "Why don't you let the poor guy alone?"

As Miss Luckmeyer patted his forearm, shushing him, Mrs. Emily Molbert made a mental note that she'd fix him, just wouldn't she, when the time came.

Not long before, Mrs. Molbert would have quailed at the very thought of their avoiding her; now she gloried in it. It wouldn't last, she knew; and, lying in bed that night, she told herself that she had put the fear of God in all of them, not just in him. The night was warm; the scented air soft-moving; occasionally a night-bird, disturbed perhaps by lovers stirring, would stir a moment, then sing itself to sleep. Mrs. Molbert slept the sleep of conscious virtue, rose to a slumbering, half-awakened morning, drowsed through a pleasant breakfast. She observed disapprovingly that Dr. Flitter, as he often did, had not come down, and she discovered with some satisfaction that the others still shied away from her a little bit. After breakfast, she headed for the porch, and halfway there her awakening was completed.

A screaming woman can awaken anyone; and Marilene's screams, starting on the second floor, increased in volume as she fled downstairs. Even after Mrs. Weatherbleak came panting from the kitchen and grabbed her by the arm, she did not stop. It took Janice, the big colored cook, with her great strength, to quiet her down, and start her talking any kind of sense. But Mrs. Emily Molbert already knew that Dr. Flitter, by some desperate act, had ended his travail; only the details remained to be revealed.

She drew back tactfully beside the banister. She watched and listened. The Punys joined her. Marilene sobbed her story out on Janice's soft shoulder. Miss Luckmeyer showed up, wearing her green peignoire. Marilene, on the thin edge of hysteria, told how she'd thought he was in the bathroom because he didn't answer to her knock, and how she'd opened up his door to get his dirty sheets —and there he was; he'd gone and killed himself; and he was dead; and there was blood all over every —everything—.

Janice quieted her again, and made her go lie down. Then Mrs. Weatherbleak and Janice went upstairs; and Mrs. Molbert heard them gasp, and heard their footsteps halt, when they came to his door. She heard them turn right back without going in; she heard George Giele asking what was wrong, and Mrs. Weatherbleak telling him and asking him to please call the police.

And all the while, outside, the sun shone, and birds of Spring sang forth unheedingly, and a light breeze came floating in from the

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salt sea. Nor did Mrs. Molbert now forget that these were there; they formed a background pattern for the excitement which had seized her; she did not share the cold shock which, like a sudden, treacherous wave, had swept the house.

The police arrived, some in plain clothes and some in uniform, and two reporters came. They went upstairs, and some of them came down again, paler than before. They were joined by others; an ambulance drove up. And, when they started to ask questions, Mrs. Weatherbleak pleaded with everyone to tell them only what they really had to know, because, she said, in her position the last thing she wanted was a scandal and all the *nice* people who lived there assured her of their discretion; the others did not count.

To the reporters and the police, Dr. Flitter became a stranger living among strangers. No one knew anything about his past or his affairs. Yes, they all said, he had lived down in Australia or somewhere. Yes, sometimes letters came to him from there. No, he never did seem to have any friends. And yes, Mrs. Weatherbleak declared, maybe he had had money troubles, because she'd had to carry him for quite a while.

They learned no more from Mrs. Molbert than from the rest. Instead, she learned from them. She learned that they'd found ashes in the basin in his room, as though he'd spent those last slow midnight hours murdering with fire the pictures which helped to keep alive a world that had to die with him. She learned that they had found an empty envelope, an empty frame. She learned that she, she alone, now held the remnants of that undead world to do with as she would, to hoard, to hint about, to auction off.

She, with the others, haunted the long hall, picking up scraps of information here and there. Upstairs he lay, dead and with none to mourn. Beside him on the bedside table, his alligator bag lay open, neat and orderly, its shining instruments spread out in rows. He lay there naked, a blood-soaked bath-towel underneath his wound. A hypodermic half-full of a local anaesthetic had been replaced; a fallen scalpel still lay beside his hand. He had gone suddenly insane, the police declared; he had tried to perform some crazy sort of operation on himself.

It was at this point that Mrs. Emily Molbert recalled the words she had spoken only hours before, and knew what he had tried to do.

It was then that she looked around her, and saw the knowledge and the horror and the awe dwelling in Mr. Puny's face, and Mrs. Puny's, and George Giele's, and Miss Luckmeyer's, and Mrs. Weatherbleak's.

Standing in the hall, like any stranger in a crowd watching a to-

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tal stranger's accident, she watched the basket in which they bore him being carried down the stairs. She waited till it passed beyond the door, until, creaking like an old wicker chair, it had been loaded in the ambulance. Then, feeling their eyes upon her, she almost ran upstairs, ran to her room, seized a few bracelets and two or three more rings. She put them on. She took her Chinese shawl, and draped it round her shoulders. Then she emerged. Slowly and decorously, she came downstairs. She swirled the shawl around her narrow hips. She went into the parlor, seating herself on the red davenport. There, smiling a tissue-paper smile, surrounded by the past and its dead people, she waited for the courtship.

FOR MYSTERY FANS—these swiftly-paced mystery thrillers are now on sale at your newsstand:

MERCURY MYSTERY BOOK-MAGAZINE—"Epitaph for a Virgin" by Robert Arthur. An exciting original novel by the well-known magazine, radio and TV writer; featuring tough ex-pug Max London and two beautiful women: Selma Carle, the model who poses in the nude and is, surprisingly, a virgin, and the voluptuous Meg Philips, who isn't.

A BESTSELLER MYSTERY—"Murder Muscles In" by Max Franklin (originally titled "Justice Has No Sword"). "Smashing climax. Don't miss it . . ." says the San Francisco *Call-Chronicle.*

A JONATHAN PRESS MYSTERY—"The Man in the Green Hat" by Manning Coles. "Fast action . . . Grand scenery . . ." reports *The Saturday Review.*

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The Science Screen

by CHARLES BEAUMONT

WHEN IT APPEARED, IN LATE 1951, that the science fiction book boom was for real, hosannas were sung throughout the land by print-starved *tifosi;* there was fan-dancing in the streets and over all a great and merry feeling of fulfillment. At last! That's what we breathed, eyes gratefully Eastwards. At last! And an ineluctable optimism overwhelmed us as we waited for the promised feast.

It came, sure enough, in quantities undreamed of, and we began to gorge as hungry men will. In fact, so keen was our appetite that it took a long time for us to realize the truth. Which was: Though in terms of attractiveness, service and variety the feast was gratifying, the food itself was stale, flat and unpalatable.

We were being fed leftovers.

The s.f. book boom reached its peak toward the end of 1952, then began to level off and now, unfortunately, we are in much worse shape than before it all started. Novels labeled *science fiction* are refused at the bookstores—the same bookstores that had, so short a time previously, built elaborate displays of rockets, and hawked s.f. from sections devoted to the genre. I know of at least one case in which a publisher saved an excellent s.f. title from death-by-non-distribution by palming it off as "a story about strange power, hypnotism, reincarnation—like Bridey Murphy." (Which, needless to say, it wasn't.) Probably there are other, similar cases.

I hack through this well-beaten territory for a reason. Because, though this column is not concerned with books, it *is* concerned with motion pictures, and the s.f. book boom-and-bust is about to be repeated; the same thing is about to happen to films, and despite our forewarning, there is nothing we can do about it.

I say 'the same thing'. That isn't strictly true: there is a difference. Books failed for two important, and surprising, reasons: *a*) The standard of quality of new material was distressingly low, and *b*) The stockpile of acceptable old material was simply not large enough to supply the sudden demand; it was, in fact, all but exhausted in less than a year. Bitter wormwood was quaffed by enthusiasts everywhere when we finally forced ourselves to this unbearable conclusion. It was the publishers' collective fault,

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of course, for showing so little judgment on the question of saturation; but it was also our fault. Most of us thought that the supply of good science fiction was limitless; we should have known better and recognized the boom as a presage of black days. Still, they had used the machine gun technique with mysteries, hadn't they? And there were always quite a few decent mysteries to be found, weren't there? And it hadn't killed *that* field, had it? *

With s.f. films the difference is this: Far from exhausting the supply of masterpieces available for motion picture presentation, Hollywood has (with certain exceptions) studiously ignored them. There weren't many great stories that did not ultimately see publication during the book boom; for the most part, these have not been touched by the studios. SLAN, DARKER THAN YOU THINK, PRELUDE TO SPACE, BRAVE NEW WORLD, and hundreds of others—all absolutely perfect for films—lie waiting, while the producers go about mumbling, "Well, I guess we've done all there is to do with the rocket stuff. Back to Ma and Pa Kettle."

Of the two, I think the latter is the less endurable tragedy. Yet it is real, it is happening. The Vine Street rumble has it: s.f. films are on their way out. The public's had enough—or will have had, by the end of a year. The gag's been milked all it can stand. Now it's dry. Dead. Gone. . . . And the Vine Street rumble is never wrong.

I think we have pretty good grounds for disgust. But I also think that we should be grateful—deeply grateful. For, when one thinks about it, what has come out of this so-called s.f. movie boom? A lot of hoked up monster epics, some ridiculous and very bad space travel yarns, a passel of hybrid low-bred Mad-Professor-type B's, and a bare handful of decent films—perhaps not so many as might have been had no boom existed and had s.f. remained a cryptic symbol with the public.

It was hoped that the sudden, inexplicable craving for science fiction movies would result in the screening of classics, old and new, and I suppose there are those who still cherish this hope, but the handwriting was on the wall twelve months ago. Classics will be filmed occasionally (Verne's JOURNEY TO THE CENTER OF THE EARTH, for example, is being readied, with Gary Cooper slated to star), but this has little to do with the boom. For, after all, the truly memorable films are still those that appeared without the label. (Or,

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* *I am not going to intrude editorially on Mr. Beaumont's opinions; but for a slight dissent from this analysis, see the* Recommended Reading *department in this issue. Also, for the most interesting suggestions I've read on the relation of s.f. films to the book bust, see Robert Bloch's* Worst Foot Forward, *in the amateur magazine* Inside, *May, 1956.* —A. B.

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perhaps, stigma would be a better word.)

So let there be hope. They have lowered the boom on s.f., but we will gain far more than we have lost.

Proof of this may be seen in the concluding chapter of an epic we shall call BEAUMONT'S ADVENTURES IN TINSELVILLE, OR THE BEAST WITH A MILLION REGRETS. The first part of this stirring saga has already been written (F&SF, June, 1956), against the advice of those In The Know; the remainder is somewhat easier to chronicle, for the author is now beyond the reach of those whom he is likely to offend. Barring future weaknesses and lapses of resolution, I have worked my last in the studios and am, as they say, at liberty. At least until that day I take the advice of a Hollywood agent, who, when asked how to achieve a position slightly better than that of hireling, said, "It's easy, kid. Just write a best seller."

A couple of months ago, I got a telephone call from a producer at a major studio. He'd never done a science fiction picture in his life, hated what he'd read of the stuff, broadcast his displeasure loudly and was, consequently, assigned to do two s.f. films. Having heard something vague about my work at Universal, he wondered if I'd care to drop by for a chat. I dropped by, and we chatted and all I can remember is that at one point he (we'll refer to him as John Dough) hurled a copy of THE MARTIAN CHRONICLES across the room in a fury, with the comment: "There's nothing in that thing we could possibly use. I want something *good!*" Also that he was anxious to give away a great deal of money.

Did I know any plots? I did, and reeled them off. Mr. Dough listened and at the end of five and a half hours told me he "appreciated my investment," going on to explain that I had invested my time in a sound stock—or, in other words, I needn't expect any cash for the interview. Would I come in tomorrow?

Tomorrow proved no more fruitful. Every plot—and there must have been two hundred bandied about—was "too advanced, too advanced." They wanted something graphic and simple, "something the jerks will sit still for." I tried a few more, then dug up a dozen or so issues of *Wonder Stories* magazines, none later than 1930, on the hope that what was advanced in s.f. circles 25 years ago would be just right for Hollywood today. All were returned. "Too advanced."

Finally—after the best of Bradbury, Kuttner, Clarke, Heinlein, Matheson, Neville, *et al.*, had been rejected; after all the *Wonder Stories* old-timers had been downthumbed—it was decided that this picture should be about a giant ape.

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"Apes are always good in Hollywood," Producer Dough said. "Besides, I know a guy with two suits. Damn good man."

To keep it science fiction, I came up with the genuinely unique idea of *putting a human brain in the ape's body*, and that cinched it. We were rolling.

(After a few days I suggested we change it to the story of a giant producer with a human brain, but the joke did not go over. Hollywood is a humorless town.)

Some weeks later the treatment was finished and so was I. The studio had received a wire from New York (all the Upper-Brass Brass seem to be in New York) advising that there would be no more science fiction of any kind from Nameless Pictures, Inc. I understand other factories got similar wires.

There are over sixty films either completed or too far in the works for cancellation, so we'll be swinging for another year; but that, I think, will be that.

Most of the goodies mentioned in earlier columns have, I regret to say, been put on the shelf. No progress whatever has been made on THE DEMOLISHED MAN, and Pal's THE TIME MACHINE is still a-begging. The rest collect dust. Richard Matheson's THE SHRINKING MAN is now changed considerably from its original conception, and it is likely that you will find the name Richard Allen Simmons sharing credit space.

Of the new pictures, only one—ON THE THRESHOLD OF SPACE—is worthy of examination, but its status is shaky. The other items (WORLD WITHOUT END, BLOOD OF THE BEAST MEN, VAMPIRE PLANET, THE INDESTRUCTIBLE MAN) are uniformly bad and to be avoided at all cost.

THRESHOLD is a triumph of excellent gadgets over poor acting, poor writing, and poor direction. That it emerges as entertainment at all is due wholly to the intrinsic and unspoilable fascination of such things as Stapp's rocket sled and the barely science-fictional stratospheric gondola; for Guy Madison and Virginia Leith are both enough to drive one caterwauling from the theatre. Dean Jagger, generally a capable hand, seems embarrassed in his role of Visionary, and the "bits" aren't any help. But it must be said, in fairness, that the late John Hodiak turned in the finest performance of his career as the counterpart of Colonel Stapp.

Francis Cockrell is an able scenarist, yet you'd never be able to tell it from this picture. The dialogue is old-cloche and old-cliché and frequently downright winceable.

However, the sled is a marvel to behold, and the scenes in and about the gondola are suitably inspiring, frightening and eerie.

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Mrs. Boyd's husband is the distinguished Dr. William C. Boyd, professor of immunochemistry at Boston University; and with his collaboration she has published a good deal of sober serious science fiction under the name of Boyd Ellanby. On her own now, the former Lyle Gifford has written a story of magic for Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, *and for F&SF this cautionary tale of the danger of being simultaneously an amateur writer and an amateur magus. This interest in the Black Art can hardly surprise her learned husband, who is himself not only an immunologist but also (to the wonder of Boston U.) a magician.*

Verb Sap?

by LYLE G. BOYD

SOMETHING THAT MANY PEOPLE DON'T know about demons is that they are very literal-minded, and there are few things they detest more than the careless use of words. Most authors, on the other hand, are not at all literal-minded; but a respect for words, as tools of their respective trades, is one thing that demons and writers have in common, and Simon Esterhazy should have known this.

He wasn't officially an author, of course, but he tried. He spent long hours in the library of the old Esterhazy house, pounding away at his typewriter or speaking into his dictaphone; and on many nights he stopped work only when Officer O'Malley, who had the after-midnight beat, tapped at the window to warn him of the approach of morning.

By the time Simon reached 37, the top of his head was balding, a sulky frown separated his pale blue eyes, and his mouth was a drooping line in a pudgy face; and although he had written hundreds of stories comprising many hundreds of thousands of words, never yet had he had the pleasure of seeing any of these words in print.

After so many years of frustration, a man can hardly be blamed for seeking outside help. How he arranged for the contact doesn't matter. Desperate men are resourceful, and there are always ways. Simon's chief mistake, and I think it may fairly be called a

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grave one, was that he neglected to do much research into the habits and psychology of demons before he went to meet one.

One evening late in October, Simon had been re-writing the first draft of his new novel, *The Dhulls of Venus*. Never before, he was convinced, had his writing attained such heights, with language so vivid and emotions so intense; no wonder the magazines conspired to keep him out of print, when he could create prose so far beyond the powers of the average scribbler!

He read the first page again:

Hector braced his sinewy shoulders against the Venusian temple, facing Jaynor the enraged High Priest, who held the struggling Princess Delna in his writhing arms.

"Yield your secret, Earthling," Jaynor laughed viciously.

"Never!" flung back Hector adamantly.

"Then the Princess dies?" he riposted.

"Hold!" rasped Hector desperately.

At that moment, as the clock struck midnight, the awaited summons came. First, Simon packed his briefcase; next, he glanced briefly at a marked page in his Roget, to refresh his memory; then he walked down the front steps, nodded to O'Malley who was just coming on duty, walked across the street, up a block, and into the park.

The moon had not yet risen, and clouds hid the stars. As he waited on the designated bench, he heard no sound but the rattle of dried leaves on their branches, but suddenly a blurred shadow was occupying the other end of the bench. While Simon was still trying to frame his opening sentence, the demon spoke.

"Before we proceed, Mr. Esterhazy, I must caution you that any notion you may harbor of making an agreement with us, and then avoiding payment at the last moment by some clever device, is highly unrealistic. You may as well discard the idea at once."

"Not at all!" said Simon, glad that the darkness hid his blush. "I mean, why should you doubt me?"

"I don't know what Dr. Freud would say about your first response," said the demon, "but we'll let the question drop. Now, to recapitulate, you write fantastic stories that nobody will publish?"

"I do. And I wish to break through the editorial conspiracy and achieve publication so the world can recognize my unique talents. I don't know whether you ever read such work . . . ?"

"Certainly," said the demon. "Like all specialists, we try to keep up with the latest developments in our own and related fields. I have the greatest respect, for instance,

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for Wells, Stapledon, and Clarke—"

"*Them?* Oh, they had an idea now and then, I grant you, but their prose is prosaic, humdrum, dead. What have they known of the ecstasy of the active verb, the glory of the adverb? Why, compared to me, they show no linguistic imagination at all."

"*De gustibus* . . . Well, I deduce that you are not asking me to transform you into another Wells or another Stapledon. What in particular *do* you want? Be specific, please."

"I want to be published," said Simon.

"Nonsense. How is it possible to publish a man? For one who claims to be an artist with words, you seem to be extremely careless; but you mean, I suppose, that you want any stories you may write from now on to be published. Agreed. What else?"

"I want to write with words of flame, with—"

"Request denied," said the demon. "We can't have the fire department being called out every time a magazine carrying one of your stories hits the newsstands, and what the postal authorities would say I daren't imagine."

"I was only speaking metaphorically," said Simon.

"In my profession we learn to avoid metaphors, and you'd be well advised to do the same in yours. Ambiguity will get you nowhere."

"You make it very hard for an artist. Well, I want, first, publication. Second, I want my stories to *live*."

"Request denied. Just imagine what would happen if a horde of little green men suddenly erupted in Times Square. Or think of the chaos at Macy's if every woman suddenly acquired the power of telekinesis."

"You're being deliberately obtuse," said Simon. "If you're not interested in me, say so."

"Oh, I'm interested, all right. Try phrasing your wish differently."

Taking a deep breath, Simon nerved himself to the crucial gambit. "Well, let me put it this way: I request you so to enhance my power over words that I fully transmute my imagination and my feelings into my prose; so that, in fact, by my prose I am transmogrified."

The silence seemed very long to Simon. The chill of the night nibbled at his bones, and his skin prickled.

"I see," said the demon at last. He sighed. "As a rule we don't much care for obsolescent words, especially those with comic overtones, but if those terms are acceptable to you, they are acceptable to us. They have been recorded, and your account is now open. Are you ready to sign?"

Simon almost snickered as he fumbled for his pen, so triumphant did he feel. The clouds overhead

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were scattering now, and a lopsided red moon was rising above the trees. It cast a ruddy light on Simon's end of the bench, of a magnitude so great that he could clearly perceive the black gothic letters on the parchment that drifted onto his knees. Then he hesitated, peering at the shadowed end of the bench.

"We forgot to mention the time element," said Simon. "How long does our agreement remain in effect? And when do you collect payment?"

"Surely that is implicit in the terms themselves? The account remains open throughout your life; we collect when we close the account."

"Very well," said Simon, and signed. "But before I return this document, I should like to test my new powers." From his briefcase he removed a storage battery and dictaphone, connected the two, and put the recording disc in place.

"I shall test them on Chapter Ten of my new novel, which I completed last evening. It reads so extremely well that I hardly see how improvement is possible, even with your help, but — Now why didn't I think of that before? First person point of view. Let Hector tell the story himself. I'll try it. Ah, I see already that literature will be incalculably the richer for this morning's work! What was that you said?"

"I only said," said the demon, "that I agree with you entirely."

The old red moon was paling now, and nearby a bird chirped. Simon turned the switch to RECORD, closed his eyes, and spoke into the mouthpiece.

"Chapter Ten. *'With the Princess Delna in peril, what man would be intimidated by even these Venusian monsters? With my back against the temple wall, and Delna trembling in the High Priest's arms, I prepared to sell my life dearly.*

"'"Come hither, Jaynor!" I demanded stentorianly.'"

The demon made a choking sound. "Are you sure that's a proper adverb? I don't remember seeing it in Roget."

"Can't I create a word if I want to?"

"Sh-h-h! No need to shout. Morning's coming, and people will hear you."

Simon listened. In the distance sounded the rapid tramp of feet on sidewalk. "Probably just O'Malley on his beat. Now where was I?"

"You told Jaynor to come hither."

"Oh yes . . . *'"Mere words are useless, Earthling," commented contemptuously the High Priest. "Render us your secret or we keep the Princess."*

"'"Never!" I rapped loudly.

"'"You have committed high treason," accused Jaynor vindictively.

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"'"*Love knows no law,*" *I riposted witheringly.*

"'"*Watch out, Hek-Tor! He has a stun-gun concealed in his* mtah," *discovered Delna breathlessly.*'"

The sound of a footstep in the grass caused Simon to open his eyes. Standing before him was Officer O'Malley, swinging his nightstick and darting his flashlight around the bench.

"Something wrong, Mr. Esterhazy? What's all the noise about?"

"What noise?" said Simon. "If an author can't sit peacefully on a park bench and dictate a story—"

"At five o'clock in the morning? Besides, what I'm referring to wasn't dictating, it was somebody yelling 'Come here, Jane, or—' And then a rapping begins, a rat-a-tat-tat so loud I could hear it two blocks away. Look, you're doing it again!"

Simon glanced down at his left hand. It was, indeed, rapping loudly on the wooden bench, with a will of its own. He clenched his fingers, but the doubled fist only rapped the harder. Frantically Simon forced the hand into his coat pocket, and once again the morning air was quiet except for the wakening birds.

"Sorry, O'Malley. I must be nervous, I guess."

"Then why don't you go along home and get some sleep?"

"As soon as I finish this chapter."

Slowly, O'Malley walked away, and Simon tried to collect his thoughts. From the shadow at the end of the bench came the demon's voice.

"Don't stop now. You can't leave Hector in a spot like that."

"But what's making me so nervous? Or is this just what happens to the creating artist? Certainly my prose has never been more alive—did you ever encounter a greater variety of powerful verbs?"

"Never. In fact, I begin to realize that you wholly merit the future in store for you."

"Then I'll go on . . . '*The priests were advancing menacingly.*

"'"*Stay back!*" *I rasped sharply.*'"

A fit of coughing stopped Simon. As he gasped and struggled for breath, his left hand crept out of his pocket and began to rap the bench again. Down the path, O'Malley paused, shook his head, and walked on.

"My throat's so sore I can hardly speak," said Simon.

"Of course; what else do you expect when you rasp?"

"And my hand won't hold still."

"Because you rapped, of course. You'll have to be careful, you know. Don't forget that you're transmuting your emotions and your prose."

Simon picked up the mouthpiece. "I feel remarkably tired. As soon as I get Hector out of this jam and into the next one, I think I'll stop."

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"I can hardly wait," said the demon.

"'"*The villainous priest raised his stun-gun and pointed it full at me. Frantically I flicked the switch to activate my forcefield. It did not work!*

"'"*Save for a miracle, we are lost!" I diagnosed despondently.*

"'"*Listen! I hear spaceships," recognized Delna ecstatically.*

"'"*Friend or enemy, they come too late," hissed Jaynor.*

"'"*Alas, my mind whirls in confusion, Delna," I disintegrated gradually.'*"

Dropping the transmitter, Simon rubbed his forehead. "What's happening to me? I feel as though I were going to pieces."

"Exactly what you said, Simon."

"But I didn't expect the power to work so *thoroughly*. . . ."

Then Simon began to laugh. "This power may have its uncomfortable aspects, but it's cheap at the price. Don't you realize, even yet, how I've fooled you? By transmutation and transmogrification, the very prose I create engenders my own reality. By the words I use I preserve my life, and you can never collect payment!"

"More than ever," said the demon, "I appreciate the virtue that lies in exact meanings."

"What a joke on you!" said Simon. "Well, where was I? Oh yes, Hector was at his wits' end.

"'"*Do you give up?" snarled Jaynor.*

"'"*The Space Patrol!" ejaculated Delna ecstatically.*

"'*As the white-clad space police swarmed into the temple and atomized the priests, Delna flung her lithe body into my trembling arms.*

"'"*Your beauty steals my breath away," I enthused pantingly.*

"'"*Hek-tor!" she succumbed languishingly.*

"'"*Delna!" I choked expiringl—*'"

"I wonder," said the demon as he marked PAID to Simon's account, "why so many people assume that life is the only form of reality?"

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R. V. Cassill, that unique double-specialist in the paperback crime novel and the literary short story, returns with an O. Henry Prize story in which — as in The Waiting Room *(F&SF, July, 1956) — he reveals the imaginative Other World of terror that can impinge upon the drabbest reality.*

The War in the Air

by R. V. CASSILL

EVEN WHEN JIMMY STARK WAS dead his parents had no idea of what he had been doing that could kill him like this. They went to City Hospital when they were summoned, after the police who had found him in the park had traced his address, and saw his unmarked body lying loose on the bed as though inside him the bones might have all been broken into dozens of pieces or been softened by the impact of death into a substance softer than his ten year old muscles.

With awed, servile curiosity they asked the doctor what had happened to their son and got only a kind shrug for an answer. There could be an autopsy if they wished. Perhaps it was a stroke, the doctor said. Perhaps Jimmy had overexerted himself in play. That happened sometimes. Not very often of course. Was Jimmy inclined to overdo things?

"Yes, he was," his mother said. "Oh yes. He was an eager little fellow."

The parents trembled in the shock of seeing the boy dead and went home by taxi to sleep in the mediocre suburb where the need for victory is born but where it becomes acute infrequently, where its imaginative forms are invented but not understood.

Jimmy had taken his first air victory in June, at a time when it was critically necessary to him as a matter of morale. His world, which was pretty much composed of his mother and father, had come to depend on him with a weight that could only be relieved by that swift successful pass of combat more intense than love and more impersonal than murder. Through the preceding winter and spring there had been reason to worry—if there had been anyone able to understand and willing to worry—about the tension building up in him as

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he waited for action. The tension had led him frequently to melancholy and crazy fits of temper at home or at school of the sort that would have been familiar to anyone who had spent some time in an Air Corps Junior Officer's Mess, but that were merely puzzling to his folks.

The first combat took place in the southwestern corner of Lincoln Park while he was on his way home from swimming. He was thoroughly miserable. On top of other things his nose was stopped up from the irritation of the water so that he could scarcely breathe. He disliked very much having to go home. His father would be testing the lawnmower in the back yard or working on it in his shop in the garage. Probably his mother would be next door at the Vicos', perhaps sitting in the porch swing behind the vines with Harlan Vico and Harlan's mother, the clink of ice in their three glasses and the hard murmur of their laughter coming from the shadow of the porch like pellets flung from ambush.

If that turned out to be the way it was, Jimmy would go in through his own front room, dining room, and to the kitchen, and the twilit rooms would whisper a little to him until he found the cord to turn on the kitchen light. They would whisper "your own mother" as he passed the soft shapes of furniture and the lecherous open spaces of the floor and remembered the doggone things Billy Cornwall had told him. He would stand in the kitchen with the light from overhead glinting on the unclean porcelain of the sink and the dishes, wishing awfully that his mother would keep things clean, wanting to break something but with nothing in sight that he dared to break.

So, because he had to go home to that and didn't want to, he took the long way through the park to the streetcar instead of the short way. This journey brought him to the clearing where the older boys were flying their model of a jet plane.

The model was attached to long cords that held it in a circle and at the same time controlled it. When he saw it first it was swinging in high, fast circles. It was nearly as high as the treetops, he thought; at any rate he could see it move above the dark green of the trees beyond the clearing before he had time to see the boys controlling it from below. For a stunning second it seemed to be a real plane and to be his.

Seeing it, he stopped in the thrill of recognition. He stood a hundred feet from the boys and the plane passed directly over him at one extreme of its orbit. Time after time he watched it go over. Each time it passed him was like a touch and he grew dizzy with the excitement and with keeping his eyes on

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its fast circle. He could feel his hands tighten like claws and all the muscles in his trunk contract. It hurt. He crouched a little and let the pure spasm of hate possess him. "Vico," he whispered. The plane swung in two more intense circles. "Vico," he whispered again through his bared teeth.

The model, controlled by an ingenious rigging of cord, was built to perform a number of maneuvers besides level flight. As he kept repeating the name like an incantation, some unseen tug of the controls sent it diving, and like a real plane, the sound of its motor changed pitch, and in the rising whistle all at once Jimmy felt himself confirmed, safe, as though a door behind him, opening formerly on danger, had been swung to and bolted.

As though he could breathe now —only now—he threw back his head and drew in the damp lakeshore air in big gasps. It was like coming up from swimming underwater, he thought, and the images of his afternoon at the beach blent with the present moment. Holding his breath under water he might have felt like saying, "Vico." Then the air could have come miraculously into his lungs.

"Vico," he said quietly now, and the name was both relief and requiem, the amazed acknowledgment of intimacy so fierce that it could never be glimpsed except in its own light, like a welder's work, illumined by his working torch beyond the dark glass of his mask.

"Vico," he said to himself in wonder as he walked on across the park to the streetcar stop. He began to laugh and raced on, ripping leaves from the bushes and tossing them over his head.

So he was not surprised when he found at home a scene that was different from the one to which he usually returned, something festive and vaguely scorching. His mother and father were at the table together in the kitchen and they had just finished eating. His mother was sitting stiffly in her chair. She had on a pretty blue and white dress, a cool dress for summer, and her face was pale but very pretty he thought.

His father was leaning across the table toward her, and he had heard his father's voice rising fast and unusually confident when he came in through the front rooms. His father was bare to the waist and hair on his chest was spotted with bread crumbs.

When he drew his own chair to the table and his mother had passed him food, his father turned to him and said, grinning, "We're having a little old celebration tonight, Jimmy."

"Uh huh."

"Don't get him in this," his mother said. "Please, Stuart."

"We're having a few drinks to celebrate," his father said. He raised his water glass and Jimmy

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saw that it was full of whiskey. "Yes, sir, things like this don't happen every day."

"No, sir," Jimmy said and his father looked at him owl-eyed as though he had expected a question and was thrown off track by his complacent agreement.

"You know what we're celebrating? We're going to have some new neighbors on the other side of the goddam fence. Old Harlan Vico has decided to move back home—back down Sa-outh where folks are *friendlier,* I hear, but I expect he thought they were pretty goddam friendly here, some of them."

"Stuart, that's enough, that's enough," his mother said. She dabbed her eyes with her knuckles and left the table. Jimmie heard her go into the bedroom and shut the door.

After a while his father said to him in a gentler voice, "It's true. The Vicos are moving."

"I know," Jimmy said.

"Wasn't he a slimy little mink, though? I knew what he was from the time they moved in. You have to hate a guy like that."

"I hated him," Jimmy said. He helped himself to the pudding which was still cool from the icebox and had large slices of banana, still partly crisp, in it. It was his favorite and he thought his mother must have made it especially for him, as if she had known he would deserve a treat this evening.

His father stared hopefully at him. Between the man and boy there seemed a strand of hope that the events of this day might have awakened something slumbering a long time, some demand that had month by month and year by year been buried under the routine of work and home until it was conceivably dead forever. He put out his hand and rumpled Jimmy's hair. He said, "Things are going to be better, kid. Whadda you say? Whadda you *say* . . . ?"

"Sure, Dad." The pudding was awfully good, and Jimmy helped himself to another bowl of it.

His father went in the bedroom and presently came back carrying a large stack of movie magazines, confession, and religious periodicals. "Burn these, will you, kid?" Then in embarrassment, as though he must momentarily play a role effeminate and formal—effeminate in its very formality, perhaps—said quickly, "I think these were a lot of her trouble. You know she would read them so much. Burn them tonight, huh, kid?" Then his father turned, went to the bedroom, and shut the door firmly behind him.

Dreamily, lazily, almost as though something inside himself were trying to laugh but he was too lazy to let it, Jimmy finished eating. He drummed lightly with his spoon on the edge of the empty bowl, listening to the silver and clear sound of its ringing.

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But when he carried the magazines through the back yard to the incinerator in the alley he noticed how *feathery* his legs felt, and a headache had begun, a small pain above his eyes.

He ripped the magazines apart so they would burn. In a minute or two the flames were rising higher than the rusty top of the incinerator. On the blast of hot air, sparks rose and floated between him and the pale stars. It was like watching a Mig burn, he thought, remembering the name Mig without giving it any particular association, not wondering even from where he remembered it. There goes the fuel tank, he thought, as more pages caught and the fire came up. He felt a proud, melancholy identification with the man he had shot down—not bothering to name the man Vico any longer—and this seemed to justify the pain in his head. He felt that what had happened separated him from other people. He *remembered* that this uprush of fire into the night was the token sign of his manhood and mortality and that properly the sign confirmed his aloneness.

Behind him he heard bicycle wheels on the cinders of the alley, but he did not turn to look until he heard the whisper, "Hey, Jimmy? That you?"

It was Billy Cornwall, the fat kid who lived on the other side of the alley. Billy was thirteen, three years older than he, and he never knew whether Billy was going to pick on him or not. Billy was apt to if he said a word that questioned Billy's opinions or actions. He hated having Billy come up and catch him looking at the fire.

"What are you burning?" Billy asked.

"Nothing."

"OK," Billy said. He pushed his bicycle closer so the front wheel was almost against the wires of the incinerator. He kept one fat leg over the frame of the bicycle and leaned on the handlebars. "Where were you this afternoon, Jimmy? You know what happened at your house?"

"I went swimming," Jimmy said. "I went to Lincoln Park like I always do."

"Wow," Billy said. "Things were really humming for a while. Your Dad and my Dad and Tom Simms beat hell out of this old Vico. Your Dad come home early and found him and his old woman at your place, so he got these two and they went back for him. Boy."

The light of the flames in the incinerator was going; only a few black and weightless fragments, rimmed with sparks, came up now from the pile of ashes within the fire-rusted wire frame.

"Your Dad tell you about it?" Billy asked. "Jeez, when I got there old Mrs. Vico came running out of your house in them shorts she wears, yelling for the police—'Pohleeez'—and Tom Simms caught her

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right by the fence and twisted her arm up behind her and he said, 'You want to call the police, lady?' What they did to Vico! I guess it wasn't what they ought to have done for what he did, I don't think."

Jimmy glanced toward the Vico house and saw it was without lights. He wondered, though, if the Vicos might not be in there anyway, really, moving about in the dark where they no longer could move in either lamplight or daylight.

He smelled the horseweeds around his gate. He started for the gate but Billy quickly ran the bicycle across his way. "What did your Dad do to your old lady? I bet he slapped her around, didn't he?"

"No, he didn't do that at all," Jimmy said. He tugged at the gate, but Billy wouldn't let him open it.

"I would've, or any real man would've," Billy said. "For what she did? She had it coming to her all right. I told you what I saw that time I hid in the bushes by your porch and Vico went in the kitchen with her."

"Shut up. Shut your mouth." Jimmy said.

Billy let the bicycle drop and grabbed his shoulders. "Who you telling to shut up? Do you mean it? You mean you want me to shut up?"

Jimmy clawed at Billy's face as he half lost his balance. He felt his fingernails hit the fat cheek, but then, almost before he realized that he was going to fall, he was down and Billy was astraddle his chest. He felt Billy's knees grinding into his arms.

He said, "Get off, you fat dumbbell. Get off."

"Take it back," Billy said and slapped him.

"You stinking fat dumb . . ."

"All right then," Billy said. "Don't think I didn't hear that." He fumbled for Jimmy's ears and twisted them. "Now tell me what your Mom did with old Vico. Say it."

"Nothing," Jimmy said. "Get off me. I won't." Then with a wild pain in his ears rising to a climax, he felt a calm begin, as though the pain itself were opening another door and closing it solidly behind him when he had passed. Strangely he let himself lie inert and the frightening inertness communicated itself to Billy, who let go his ears.

"Do you want me to say it?" Billy asked. "All right," He leaned forward and spoke repetitiously into Jimmy's face. Then he took down Jimmy's trousers, spit on him, got on his bicycle and rode away.

Jimmy felt the cinders through his thin shirt, cutting him, but his knowledge of them was remote and actually trivial. He looked up at the black, mastered sky and knew himself borne steadily at

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the airy center of things. "Billy," he whispered and was able to laugh.

II

He was awake before light, before the hour of dawn patrols, and he lay there for half an hour toying with his illness. There was still a pain in the back of his head, and if he stirred he felt nausea and a cramping in his bowels. If he lay absolutely quiet, both these disturbances, having something feverish about them, were comforting, like a hot towel or like lying in a hot bath.

As the light came on among the trees and telephone wires that he could see from where he lay, he played a game with the cord ring hung from the curtain. It was a ring sight, and through it he searched the sky for a passing bird or anything alive that would give him practice in killing. He aimed at leaves, and there was a fly that crawled up the screen and directly through the cross-hair center of the ring. That fly was a deader, he thought.

At six thirty he had to go to the bathroom to throw up. He was as quiet as he could be, but his mother must have been awake, for she came in as he was squatted on the floor with his cheek leaned against the soothing porcelain of the stool.

"Jimmy," she whispered. "What's the matter, honey? Hey, can you stand up? Let's get you back in bed. Why, you're burning up, honey." Her hand lay wonderfully cool and limp on his forehead, and he began to whimper in a mixture of pleasure and solicitation. He stood up and leaned against her hip as they walked back to his room.

She brought him a poached egg on toast for his breakfast and sat beside him, stroking his head while he ate. His father came in before leaving for work and asked if they shouldn't call a doctor.

"I'll take care of him," his mother said shortly.

"Well then, see that you do for a change," his father said. His father seemed, this morning, to have fallen back into the old helpless surliness which for a while last evening he had broken free of. It was pitiful that he had not known how to hold his victory, had given it back.

"All right, all right, all right," Jimmy's mother said arrogantly.

When his father had gone out and the room was hushed except for the endless remote noise of traffic spreading away like a battle front on an indecisive day of combat, Jimmy turned his face against the pillow and closed his eyes. His mother must have thought he was sleeping, because she left him and tiptoed toward the door.

He said, without opening his eyes, having something to hide from her, "The only thing is, Mom, I've just got to be well enough

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to go swimming this afternoon."

"Oh no you don't," she said. "I'll say you don't, honey. That's what made you sick today."

"But if I feel good. I may feel swell by then," he said. He knew he would not and the effort of lying when he didn't want to entirely forced tears up to burn in his eyes.

"Well, you won't," she said. "You can go another day. The lake will still be there."

During the endless morning he heard her playing the radio, then singing, then crying. When he heard her crying he went back to his killer game with the curtain ring.

Shortly before noon he caught Billy in the ring and held him there for a full minute, sliding down the bed to keep the fat boy centered until he disappeared past the end of the block. He had heard Billy's loud, happy voice and had come to immediate cramping attention. Then he'd caught him all right. Nothing happened. He whispered, "Billybillybillybilly," and waited for him to fall, but Billy rode his bike right on past the corner, dodging the trucks on Elm Street in the smart alec way he had.

Reflecting on this, Jimmy understood how truly necessary it was for him to get to the park. He spoke about it again to his mother when she came in, but she was wrapped in her own misery by now and answered sarcastically. "From now on no one goes out of this house," she said. "Our happy home. I guess that's how it will be. No one will have any fun or talk to anybody that is any fun. That's the way he wants it." Her eyes glittered hatefully. "Listen, will he ever take us anywhere on Sunday? Will he ever talk? In the spring I wanted him to take you out in the country so you could get some air and sun, but did he? He won't even take us fishing—goes with those mutt friends of his. What will he ever do but go out in that workshop and fiddle with that lawnmower? Does he think he's an inventor like Thomas Edison? Don't you think he could be a little human sometimes if he wanted? You don't know all about how he is either, Jimmy." She threw herself flat on the bed with a grotesque squawk. "Listen," she said with excitement, "what did he tell you about me last night?"

"Nothing," Jimmy said.

She watched him suspiciously. Enduring her stare, knowing that she was getting ready to lie to him, Jimmy wanted to bury his head under the pillow. He held himself quiet and said, "Nothing."

"He said ugly things to me and said a lot of things I never even thought about doing."

"He didn't tell me anything," Jimmy said and his mind raced like a steel hammer falling on a pin, "billybillybillybilly." "I want to go to sleep," he said.

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She kissed his brow. "You sure sizzle," she said. "Try to sleep now, honey." Then she added before she left, "Those magazines. Did he make you burn them all?" Getting no answer, she left him.

Jimmy waited motionless and without patience. He counted to sixty several times—he could not keep count of how many times. He could not hear her when he quit. He dressed, pushed the screen from his window and dropped to the ground. He went around the yard to the back gate, past the incinerator and down the alley to Elm Street, where he caught the streetcar that would take him to the park.

The ride was a nightmare. It was like riding a dull ship in convoy, annoyance without interest. But in the park itself, among the still flowers and the trees swaying gently up to the point where the highest leaf gave way to the shapeless sky, he became serene. It was then as if he had separated successfully from the other world.

He had a long wait still. Four o'clock passed and the boys with the model plane had not yet appeared where they had been yesterday, but he waited now with certainty.

He sat on a bench a little removed from the clearing. A policeman who had circled past him several times looked as though he wanted to question him but never did.

A dog came and sniffed at his shoes. He patted the dog and made friends with him. Carefully saying nothing, he developed a language of gestures that the dog understood. He would pretend to throw a stick and the dog would race a few steps after the imaginary stick and then return to him with its bright eyes puzzled. A little more urging and the dog would retrieve it, he was sure. He laughed at the dog and the dog cocked its head cutely in a sort of reply.

At five the boys came carrying the model plane and the apparatus for its control, and he was ready. He watched them lay the cords out on the ground and pace off the orbit to be sure there was plenty of clearance within the trees. He saw one crouch with it to get it airborne. Then he walked closer when it began to circle until he was again standing under its path, and presently he felt the second approach when it would be made to stoop in its killing dive.

Afterward he walked with difficulty to the streetcar. He discovered that he had left the house without bothering to get money for fare, and it was his luck that he found three tokens in his pants pockets. Just his luck. He gave the next to last token to the conductor for this ride home.

When the car turned onto Elm Street, from a long way off he could hear the purr of a siren

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running at low speed, and as he approached closer to his own corner he saw the crowd on the curb and the red light turning and flashing in the sunshine on top of the ambulance. He saw the truck slanting up onto the curb, its double wheels resting on the bicycle frame. The frame was bent curiously, like the soft shapes of spaghetti. Jimmy felt a lonely smile shape his lips.

III

Then he was really sick. For two weeks he stayed in bed with a fever and a dark half-awareness of his mother and father coming into his room, and the doctor. It was not time in which he lay, but an uncomfortable timelessness in which he heard things and then lost them so that he did not know any sequence. Once his mother told him about poor Billy Cornwall's accident. Once she asked him if he had burned all the magazines. Once she said, probably to the doctor, maybe to his father, "It's this summer. He hasn't been real well since school was out. Maybe when he goes back in the fall he'll be himself." Then he had drifted down into the red-threaded blackness which was sleep, amused because he knew there was little chance of his returning to where school was, in some country oceanic distances away.

Once again Billy Cornwall came with a red star on his forehead, the star shining like blood on his fatty skin, and told him again what he had seen from behind the bush in the back yard—the thing that couldn't be true because Billy was a liar—and his mother whined, "He hurt me." Or his father was welding in the shop in the garage and the fire came from his torch like tracers from the guns in movies.

Then in the week when it seemed he was getting better, his mother told him how he had crumpled up on the porch that evening when he got home from wherever he had been.

"Where were you anyway that afternoon?" she asked him. "Boy, was I scared." The question seemed to touch her curiosity sharply. She asked him several times as though she had forgotten his answer.

"In the park," he usually told her. She looked at him skeptically, rumpled his hair and said, "Aw, you don't know where you were. You were delirious or something." She added with passion, "It was his fault, the things he told you."

Once, to his terror, he slipped and told her, "Flying."

"Flying? Judas Priest. Well, I guess you're not going to tell me. If you know, I mean, and I'll bet you don't. What do you mean, flying?"

"I don't know," he said, carefully now. "I don't remember so good."

"We'll get you out in the sun

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today," she said, "where you can see some sky. You don't have any tan at all. Fishbelly. If your father would get a car and take us somewhere—I guess I could forgive him some other things."

She went on absently arranging things in the chest of drawers and organizing her wishes like plans. "We could have a vacation," she said. "Lots of people with no more money than us have vacations every year."

"All right, Mom," he said. "Don't talk about it." He couldn't stand the note of complaint crying through her voice, though he felt guilty not to listen to it, for not being strong enough to listen and console her. "I have to sleep," he said. When he slept after a session of her complaints, Billy Cornwall would come with the red spot of death on his flesh and in the remote alleys of the sky he would have to kill again.

For the next week he spent most of his time sitting under a tree in the back yard. His father had once built an arm chair for the yard, and he sat there through the long afternoons, reading sometimes and sometimes drowsing. His mother bought him a lot of comic books. Most of them were about air battles, because those were the ones he asked for, but she got *Jungle Queen* and *Superman* because she liked them herself and thought he would like them too.

It tired him to read. Up to a point he could get interested in these books, but they were full of Spads, Nieuports, Fokkers, and Camels—old-fashioned junk that didn't seem real except for the queer excited feeling they gave him of a familiar anxiety. He wondered if a German had ever spit on Lt. Frank Luke or Capt. Eddie Rickenbacker. He thought this might have happened and that's why they were good aces too. Finally he would let the books fall from his lap and sit looking at the clouds or the leaves against the summer sky.

The doctor came once more and said there was nothing wrong with him now except that he was run down, needed vitamins perhaps to tone him up. His parents talked a little of what might tone him up, but ended in making the discussion their personal battlefield. The argument was nothing new, only more vocal than it ever had been. He for one had work, the father said, and she wanted to cat around for her own sake, not the kid's. Work? What was he doing with the lawnmower he spent his time on? Did he think that was the way things were invented? They had factories with lots of people working in them to invent things nowadays. Why didn't he catch up with the times?

It seemed to Jimmy, listening, that their argument would never be settled. It was somehow up to him to settle it for them. As long

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as they lived they would fight this way unless he could tip the balance. He didn't know how. He had got rid of the Vicos for them and got rid of Billy, but nothing was any better, and he felt no longer responsible for them except as a judge feels, waiting to utter a judgment that will not be his own but the Law's, a judgment superior to himself if he can discover what it is.

In the evenings he would sometimes go sit on a stool in the garage workshop where his father was building the lawnmower. There were two masks in the shop, and his father let him watch the welding through one of them. His father was rather pleased to have the boy sit there fascinated beside him.

And Jimmy liked this watching. At such times his sluggish heart would beat faster against his ribs. The tracery of flames, appearing through the complete darkness of the mask, was somehow the real thing. He could breathe easily as he watched, and usually he had to make a tiresome effort to breathe.

Nevertheless, the watching frightened him. He recognized his fear initially in the form of an anxiety that his father's hand would slip and let the torch swing against himself. Be careful, Dad, he thought angrily.

He began to feel that any injury to his father would be no accident; it would be the work of the power he had discovered that day in the park, and he was not ready to use that.

While he watched the dangerous flames, he remembered his father on the night of the Vicos' departure, marching with shabby arrogance to the bedroom where his mother lay, and this memory frightened him, because then he almost felt triggers ready under his fingers, and he believed there was no reason to use them yet, not against his father who was going to make a lawnmower that would make them rich, maybe.

An occasion had come when he was so close to opening up, though, that in panic he jumped from the stool on which he was sitting, threw the mask off, stared a second at the naked torch and then ran for the house.

He heard his father following him, asking what was the trouble. Having temporarily blinded himself he stumbled on the doorsill and wailed as he dropped to the kitchen floor. His mother jumped to pick him up and before he could explain, both his parents were fighting across him. "Well, did you burn him?" "Can't you see if he's all right before you start shooting your mouth off?" Their voices rang with self-pity and hatred so stupid that they could find no instrument to execute it except their son.

Weighing this, sensing the suffocation to which the three of them were committed, grasping it not in

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language but in the warlike images of his education transposed to fit the personal situation as a dull preacher might use the myth of Genesis to illustrate the planting of crops, that night in his bed Jimmy made a decision.

Lying in his bed stiffly, staring toward where no ceiling appeared, almost without passion, in the interests of justice, he thought his father would have to go. He could feel his throat and lips getting ready to whisper. He still held back, hating to whisper the name —then he let go, "Dad," diving past into the security of sleep without troublesome dreams.

In the anxiety of the next morning he wanted to take it back, but he was not at all sure that he could. Of course it was possible to stay away from the park and the model airplane—if he wanted to, but like a hypnosis an impulse thrust him toward them. It might be that he would have to go after such a commitment. He wished for more reasons, though, if it had to be that way.

He went to the workshop in the garage and played thoughtfully with the masks he and his father had worn. He slipped on his father's mask and shuddered at the smell inside and at the sweated headband touching the skin of his forehead. He discovered the dimensions of the darkness inside the mask. It was as large as the darkness of a whole night, of his room when it was utterly black, big enough for anything, and this darkness was filled with the hateful smell of his father. "Let him do one more thing to her," Jimmy thought, "and I'll go." He sat there imagining his father's hand lifted to strike, but frozen yet in the gesture for which he waited.

And then one morning he knew why he had waited, why that abstract and superior justice whose servant he had become had obliged him to wait. That morning when he returned from an errand to the corner store carrying a sack of groceries, entering the kitchen he heard his mother's voice from the back porch and a man's voice, unfamiliar and familiar at the same time, answering her.

Jimmy set the groceries on the table to free his hands. The voices from the porch fumbled viciously, as though on purpose, with the lightly balanced mechanism of his consciousness, and he stood there, taking the shock of their violation and accepting his responsibility for what he heard in those careless, awful, summery voices. He listened to his mother's laughter, and then, surprised but certain of what he thought, he whispered to himself, "They've all got to go."

His mother came into the kitchen for a dishpan. "A man's here selling sweetcorn," she explained. "Won't that be good? That will taste good."

To Jimmy the flush in her cheeks

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was a sign of her guilt, and, more than that, as he looked down from a peak of agelessness, it seemed a sign of some corruption of youth that was intolerable. "Aren't you feeling well again?" she asked jauntily. "Maybe you'd better go to your room and lie down. Go on now."

"No."

"Jimmy . . . Go on."

He stood fixed and then watched from the rear window while she went out with the vendor to his truck parked in the alley. He felt the pity of her going, because in this moment of discovery he knew that he must kill her, along with his father, and that afterward there must be an accelerated pattern of killing to which there was no imaginable limit. He felt also the pity of her sacrificing him to be the agent of this necessity by failing to be good. At the same time he made no attempt to argue the consequences of what he believed to be the truth. Now he could see the steps of a great wrong reaching back to what he did not need to bother to think of as Eden.

Where was it the family had lived before they moved here? he asked himself. He had no exact memory of another city, but he felt it. Caught in the vision, it was as though he might have been circling at a great height and seen in the haze which for airmen replaces a horizon some kind of dimple—not quite a form but a potentiality of form—that he recognized as home.

In the moment of his submission to the necessity, as though clutching at one more last human reason for what he had to do, he remembered Billy Cornwall's words about his mother. He imagined Billy waiting behind the door of the next room, ready to knock him down and spit on him. He squared his shoulders and forced himself to walk through the door to see.

Going to the park that afternoon, watching from the streetcar window the blue wink of the sky, he kept thinking to himself, "If she just hadn't of laughed with that man." The improper laughter hissed toward him from the anonymous crowd with whom he rode —all of them condemned now by what he meant to do. Every one of them had to die.

On the park bench he recaptured the vision and certainty he had known in the kitchen. The streetcar had dimmed it, like a flashback of memory where all sorts of trivia creep in—sentimental sounds of voice, promise of store-windows, weather compositions, faces reminiscent of jollier times and places back on the other side of the ocean, maybe—but triumphing over these he rose easily again and began circling. The dimple of home appeared first over one wing-tip and then the other.

He saw, between home and himself, little black shapes swift as in-

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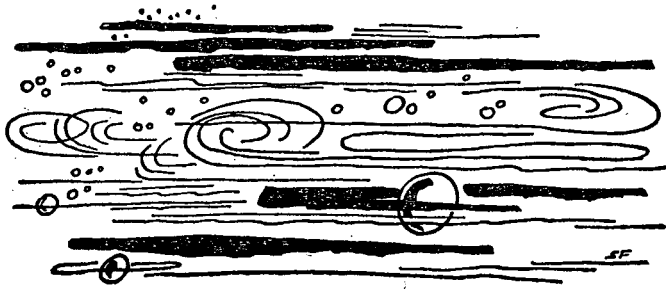
sects rise toward him from the checkered landscape. He recognized their number and their hostility without panicking. It was part of the compact that whatever he needed enough would be provided. There would be time enough.

As on the earlier occasion when he had shot down Billy he had to wait a long time. The black planes hovered in remote perspectives, waiting with him. Then, as the boys appeared carrying their model, the black planes moved in to intercept him.

The model raced on the end of the cords and Jimmy walked toward its orbit. He felt himself go with it, and in the moment of climbing for an attack position was happy enough. This time, better than on any of the earlier occasions, he sensed the moment for his diving pass. "Now," he cried to himself, without hate, without love.

It was a long way down and something seemed to thrust against his chest and stomach and drag his breath away. Then, like a blackout from the strain of diving, dark replaced the light and the shapes beyond the cockpit bubble. All together the ground beneath, the insidious planes, the imaginary haze of the horizon, the actual grass, the boys in their T-shirts, vanished.

He did not see the model crash splintering in the grass of the park, nor the boys, its owners, rushing toward it with varied expressions of chagrin and repressed pleasure on their faces.



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Recommended Reading

by THE EDITOR

I HAVE AN UNFAIR ADVANTAGE over my fellow-reviewer Charles Beaumont. In the very nature of things, I read his copy before publication, and he doesn't see mine until afterwards—which enables me craftily to have the last word (at least momentarily) as to his statements on page 82 concerning the collapse of the science fiction book boom.

Whatever the reasons for that collapse were (and you can find as many reasons as there are analysts . . . and probably most of them right), they did *not* include a "distressingly low standard of quality of new material." Since Mr. Beaumont draws the comparison with the mystery novel, I'll restrict myself to booklength stories and venture to say that if only the good s.f. novels now actually written were published, we'd probably have twice as many books in the field as we now do in this year of drought.

This is not counting the books that *would* be written if there were a receptive market. Theodore Sturgeon has not come up with anything of novel length for 3 years, the Kuttners or Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. for 4, Judith Merril for 6—why should they when publishers and public display no interest?

In 1953, when the greatest number of s.f. novels was published, we also saw the greatest number of novels of high quality—so much so that a handful of 1953's lesser entries might have won the International Fantasy Award in any later year. But today . . . Well, a few examples:

Almost a year ago the *Astounding* serial THEY'D RATHER BE RIGHT, by Mark Clifton and Frank Riley, received an award as best novel of the year at the 13th World Science Fiction Convention. Four months later Clifton told me that no book publisher had expressed the slightest interest in it—a state of apathy which has apparently continued.

Poul Anderson's excellent 1954 novel, BRAIN WAVE, was announced for simultaneous hardcover and paperback publication; the demand was so slight that the hardcover edition was canceled. (Note to collectors and librarians: A hardcover library edition can now be ordered from England—London: Heinemann, 1955. 12 *s.*, 6 *d.*)

A year ago I read in manuscript a wholly enjoyable novel by

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a frequent and much-admired contributor to this and other magazines. It was fresh and lively and exciting; the only trouble, from my point of view, was that it didn't (as indeed many of the best novels don't) break into suitable chunks for serialization. I suggested it to a major s.f. book publisher. The editor concurred: it was well worth publishing . . . in a healthier market. In the many months since then, it has still not found a publisher.

No, the last thing we need to worry about—unless one thinks in terms of far greater quantity than the peak of the "boom"—is the quality of new material. The quality novels are there now, written or waiting to be written. If a profitable market can be established, it will call them forth, along with new novels from the well-established writers who have never published booklength science fiction: William Tenn, say, or Zenna Henderson, Robert Abernathy, Walter M. Miller, Jr. . . . maybe even Beaumont and Boucher.

Meanwhile there has not been a hardcover science fiction novel in 4 months (a period in which, to continue the comparison, there've been 48 hardcover mysteries), and not too much that's new and rewarding in the way of paperbacks or simultaneous publication. (It may seem contradictory not to count "simultaneous" editions as hardcover; but the fact is that the newsstand paperback is the essential factor, and the library edition is often small or—as with the Anderson mentioned above—nonexistent.)

Much the best recent s.f.—indeed the best *pure* science fiction in a very long time—is Lester del Rey's NERVES (Ballantine, $2*; paper, 35¢), an expansion of the classic 1942 novella of the same title.

I have never quite forgiven del Rey for this brilliantly compelling study of the medical and human aspects of disaster in an industrial atomics plant (written, of course, 3 years before Hiroshima . . . when atomics was already old stuff to any s.f. reader). The first science fiction I ever wrote was a long novelet called *Barrier*. John Campbell gave it the lead position and the cover; I was to make my debut in style . . . only the same issue of *Astounding* contained del Rey's novella, and I was (quite rightly) trampled under in the rush of readers eager to acclaim a new masterpiece. (Incidentally, that same September, 1942 issue contained two shorts now recognized as classic: Malcolm Jameson's *Pride* and Lewis Padgett's *The Twonky*, plus an article by Willy Ley and nowise negligible stories by Fredric Brown and Cleve Cartmill. Those, my children, were The Golden Days!)

This new version, expanded

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from 32,000 words to 54,000 (and with no credit anywhere for the 1942 publication!), is essentially the same story: a powerfully suspenseful step-by-step account of the medical and engineering methods improvised to forestall atomic catastrophe, and of the reaction and development of characters under this stimulus of tension. Amazingly (or rather, characteristically *Astounding*-ly), very little revision has been necessary in the atomics; del Rey has filled in background, strengthened motivations, made the lesser characters more three-dimensional, and in all brought off the same all-but-impossible trick that Ward Moore accomplished in BRING THE JUBILEE: major expansion with no changes in story-line—and no padding. Result: a model of the rarest form of our genre—*science fiction,* in which the stress is equally heavy on both words.

Gordon R. Dickson's MANKIND ON THE RUN (Ace, 35¢) posits a curious future in which world stability is attained by keeping everybody on the move, so that no faction can ever become cohesive enough to cause trouble. Of course there are two Forces battling for domination of this society, with hints of a possible mysterious third —a formula plot, perhaps, but handled here with fresh ingenuity and genuinely surprising melodramatic twists. The background details are unusually well-worked-out (especially the tricky problem of writing the colloquial and vulgar speech of the future); and the whole recalls a good serial of The Golden Days mentioned above—with the addition of an odd sort of vigorous mysticism which is Dickson's own. The same Ace double-volume contains THE CROSSROADS OF TIME, Andre Norton's first novel addressed specifically to adult readers, and an enjoyable one, if less exciting and satisfying than her best juveniles. It's a conventional tale of para-time police in quest of a criminal paranoid who is exploring the pasts of a number of alternate universes in order to change their futures—

[*My God in heaven! Have you ever stopped and said to yourself, "What sort of business are we in, that one can call a concept like that 'conventional'?" (as indeed it is)? Is* this *what's the matter —that there is nothing left remarkable? But the answer to that is— as Sturgeon for instance knows so well—that the one thing inexhaustibly remarkable, in this universe and all alternates, is Man.*]

—hardly surprising enough for firstrate pursuit-suspense, but affording glimpses of a number of well-imagined worlds of *If.*

Regretfully, I must confess to disappointment in Richard Matheson's THE SHRINKING MAN (Gold Medal, 35¢). Its realistic portions are authentic Matheson: vivid, bitter, memorable (and often sexy)

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flashback vignettes of our hero's problems in human relations as he starts dwindling from normal size. But the main story, of his struggles to stay alive at a height of under one inch and to evade or slay a black widow spider, is familiar [*again!*] and repetitious; details are sometimes unconvincing or inconsistent; and the attempt to make the shrinking "science fiction," by inserting chunks of nonsensical gobbledegook, is plain preposterous —I'd find the shrinkage far easier to accept (even scientifically) if he'd simply been cursed by a witch doctor. Harold Mead's THE BRIGHT PHOENIX (Ballantine, $2*; paper, 35¢) is yet another anti-Utopia: a competent, literate telling of the rebellion of an individual against the sterile Perfect State, which you may enjoy if you've read the same story less than a dozen times already—and if you resent neither the book's allegorical attack upon Humanism nor the distortion of Christian theology in that attack.

F&SF's first *Recommended Reading* department, almost seven years ago, praised Louis Golding's HONEY FOR THE GHOST; and in all of the time since then there has not appeared another firstrate novel of supernatural terror until now, when it comes unexpectedly from a writer previously known for sweeping historical trilogies.

Marguerite Steen's THE UNQUIET SPIRIT (Doubleday, $3.75*) is, like the Golding novel, a subtle and convincing tale of witchcraft and possession. Quietly naturalistic in treatment, it builds to a climax of singular shock and horror, and artfully prepares a psychological explanation which almost (but not quite) accounts satisfactorily for its terrors. Miss Steen belongs to the Henry James-Elizabeth Bowen tradition of the ghost story, which finds psychic impingement upon a living mind more chilling than a castleful of Gothic frights; and in the obsessed occult adept Dominick John she has created as believably terrifying a child as any since Saki's Conradin in *Sredni Vashtar*.

As a footnote to Robert Bloch's piece on fans and conventions, I'd like to call your attention to a story in NEW WORLD WRITING: NINTH SELECTION (Mentor, 50¢). David Allen Ish's *The Fantasy People* is not itself fantasy or s.f., but the first treatment in serious fiction of a S. F. Convention. It's a skilful, not in the least fannish study of the fumbling toward maturity of a 16-year-old boy, by an author who is himself only 18; and even if you're an Old Convention Hand, it may make you look at the younger registrants with freshly understanding eyes.

*Books marked with an asterisk may be obtained through F&SF's Readers' Book Service. For details, see p. 128.

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Our Miss Seabright is never a conventional, formula-following writer; but this is, even for her, an odd off-trail story, as disconcertingly compounded (yet meaningful) as its title:

Stawdust

by IDRIS SEABRIGHT

"ARE YOU DOING IT?" MISS ABERnathy demanded.

"Are you?" he countered. His neat eyebrows had gone up.

"Certainly not."

"Don't be too sure. You might not be conscious of it. And it's exactly the sort of thing a woman *would* do." He looked at her with such concentrated disgust that Miss Abernathy thought: he's real all right. Not like the others. But he's not exactly a man.

She turned her gaze from him toward the flat blue water of the swimming pool. She had liked the swimming pool the best of anything on board the S.S. *Vindemiatrix,* but today there was neither inspiration nor solace in it. "But . . . what are we going to do?" she asked, looking at Mr. Faxon again.

"Wait and find out, I suppose," he answered. "It's about all we *can* do. Whichever of us doesn't change—"

"—is the one who's been doing it," she finished.

"Exactly." He turned his back on her and began to walk away, threading his way lissomely through the dummies that crowded around the pool. Mr. Pooley, Miss Davis, Mr. Elginbrod, Mr. Harris, Miss Raylor . . . what a lot of them there were! Not to mention the captain and the first mate in the dining salon and all the others who, transformed privately, were sitting or standing woodenly within the confines of their cabins. Twenty-five or thirty people, all dummies, all neatly stuffed with sawdust, all with sleek kidskin skins.

Miss Abernathy's mind moved back to her fourth day on board the *Vindemiatrix* and the first of the transformations. She had been standing by the side of the plunge, talking to Mr. Pooley. "This is a nice pool," she had said.

"Yes, nice," he had answered.

"And the color of the water—that's nice, too."

"Yes. It's nice." Had a spark of something autonomous flickered

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behind Mr. Pooley's beautiful eyes? At any rate, he had gone on to add an original observation. "The color of the light from above—I like that too. It's nice."

"Oh, do you?" An imp of the perverse had moved in Miss Abernathy. "Don't you think it would be prettier if it were a brighter yellow? A little more like sunshine?" It was true the diffused lighting over the pool had a sullen, smoky tinge, like the sandy glare of a dust storm. The robot who had designed it had slipped up.

Mr. Pooley seemed not to have heard her. "It's nice," he had repeated blandly, as if she had never spoken at all.

Miss Abernathy had turned from him with a throb of disgust. What a dummy he was! They were all dummies, every one of them. All they could do, men and women alike, was to repeat "nice" or "interesting," and think they'd said something. And speaking of dummies—what a fool she'd been, to think that the passengers on a spaceship would be an improvement over the people in her office. Romantic space travelers, indeed. They were worse, if anything.

Where were the men who did things and made things? All gone? Surely the men who designed the machines . . . But the machines designed themselves now. They were better at it than any human being could have been.

She had turned from Mr. Pooley and slipped into the turquoise water of the plunge. She swam its length twice. Then she had clambered out of the water and come back to Mr. Pooley.

He was standing exactly where he had been when she had left him. When she got up close to him, she saw why he hadn't moved. He'd never move again. He was—he was—

Oh, no. Miss Abernathy's jaw had dropped. There must be some mistake. They'd introduced her to him, only a couple of days ago. They wouldn't have introduced her to a dummy, would they?

She had looked around herself almost distractedly. Nobody had been looking toward them, nobody had been paying any attention. Delicately she had put out her fingers and touched Mr. Pooley on the arm. He felt cool and smooth and creamy, like a good grade of kid.

The bell for tea had rung. People had begun to get out of the water. Miss Abernathy had gone with the others. At the door of the plunge she had looked back. Mr. Pooley was still standing there.

The second transformation had occurred at the dinner hour. The captain—they all sat at the captain's table—had been talking in his nice, interesting voice. Miss Abernathy had found herself listening with pleasure. The captain was more the sort of man she had been hoping to meet. He knew things. He did things. He had ideas. No doubt he

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was married already. But—well—she didn't care. Anything would be better than being married to one of the usual dummies, like Mr. Pooley. She didn't care if he was married. She could be his concubine.

"We are going through an unusually interesting region of space just now," the captain had said. "We are skirting the fringes of an enormous cloud of hydrogen gas and tiny particles of dust. Though by early standards the cloud of gas is thin indeed—it contains about ten hydrogen atoms per cubic centimeter—its density is ten or a hundred times that at its center. The cloud is highly magnetized. Actually, it is considered elongated in the direction of the interstellar lines of magnetic force. Sometimes extremely interesting phenomena occur."

"Is it dangerous?" Miss Abernathy had wanted to know, leaning forward hopefully.

"Not at all. Merely interesting. We are skirting the fringes of an enormous cloud of hydrogen gas and tiny particles of dust. Though by early standards the cloud of gas is thin indeed—it contains about ten hydrogen atoms per cubic centimeter—its density . . ."

He was, Miss Abernathy had perceived, repeating himself all over again. He didn't know anything more, or have any more ideas, than the others. He'd probably memorized the whole speech from a printed tape one of the news machines had given him.

Concubine, indeed. She felt a pang of self-disgust. What had been the matter with her?

". . . elongated in the direction of the interstellar lines of magnetic force," the captain was finishing. "Sometimes extremely interest—"

He had stopped in mid-word. Miss Abernathy had bent toward him in a sort of guilty prescience. While she watched, a dribble of sawdust had trickled down from the side of his nose.

Surely the others had drawn away a little. Hadn't there been a movement, a voiceless rustle, away from the captain and her? Hadn't there been the slightest of pauses in the conversation at the table, if only for a fraction of a second? But they had gone on again almost immediately, talking, saying that things were nice, interesting, good. When dinner was over they had all got up and left the captain sitting there.

He had been sitting there in his place at the next meal, breakfast. Miss Abernathy, slipping back to the dining salon later, had found one of the robot servitors dusting him.

There had been a lot of transformations after that. It was after the sixth, or perhaps it was the seventh, that the committee had been formed.

Mr. Elginbrod had been the chairman. He had, he said, been in

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space. There must be something wrong with the servo-mechanisms. They ought to complain.

"Yes," echoed Miss Davis. "We ought to complain to the captain."

Miss Abernathy had raised her eyebrows a little. "To the *captain*?"

"Well, then, to the first mate. To someone in authority. There's no telling where this will stop. Any of us might be next."

"Absolutely," boomed Mr. Elginbrod. His expression was just as fatuous as ever, but his eyes had a wild, glassy glare. "Miss Davis is right. Something must be done. I ag—"

He stopped. Miss Abernathy, peering at him in the yellowish light, saw that his eyes had become, literally, glass.

The others had looked at him. They began to back away. When they were a reasonable distance off, they turned and ran. A little later, Miss Abernathy had heard a series of slams from their cabin doors.

That had been the end of the committee. Miss Davis hadn't been able to get back to her cabin before she had succumbed. And Miss Abernathy, making the rounds of the cabins a couple of days later with a master key she had taken from the robot chambermaid, had found that the rest of them had succumbed too. Their taking refuge in their cabins hadn't done them any good. Now they all had kidskin bodies, sawdust stuffing, and glass eyes.

Was being turned into a dummy painful? Apparently not, since none of them had cried out in the moment of transformation. Still, it was a nasty idea. And who was doing it? Was it she? Was it Mr. Faxon? Or was it just something that happened in the part of space where the *Vindemiatrix* now was? There was nobody to ask, no way of finding out. She and Mr. Faxon were the only human beings left on the ship.

Miss Abernathy sighed. She looked toward the door through which Mr. Faxon had vanished. Where had he gone? To the snack bar, for something to eat? He was fond of eating. Or to the gym, to have one of the robots massage him? He spent most of his time eating or trying to work off the results of eating. Still, he wasn't so bad. There was more to him, in a way, than there had been to the other men.

The next few days were less difficult than Miss Abernathy had feared they would be. The dummies around the swimming pool and in the dining salon were a surprising amount of company. She went swimming several times, and enjoyed it. At meals she and Mr. Faxon sat at opposite ends of the dining table, with the dummies in between, and the robots waited on them punctiliously. It wasn't very different, really, from what it had been before the other passengers were transformed.

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All the same, she was sleeping badly. She went to the iatric robot and got a box of sleeping pills. They helped, but she wakened feeling depressed. Was it the thought of all the dummies waiting woodenly in the cabins around her, or was she personally frightened? It didn't seem to be either of these. Suddenly she knew what it was. She was lonesome.

Yes, lonesome. She and Mr. Faxon were the only living people left on the ship, and yet they never exchanged a word, not even good morning. He kept his nose stuck in a book most of the time they were at table. Something ought to be done. Perhaps she'd misjudged him. His mannerisms were peculiar, certainly. But . . .

She dressed for dinner that evening with unusual care. Her washed-gold lamé dress with the bouffant waist and the little gold lamé panties. Three layers of color in her hair, with the appropriate perfumes. Shimmer wristlets and anklets. And a maquillage she'd never dared to wear before.

It took her a long time to be satisfied. She kept making the robot maid do her hair over again. When she entered the dining salon, the gong for dinner had already rung.

Mr. Faxon didn't look up from his book. Well, she hadn't thought he would. It was not until the robots were serving coffee with the dessert that she got up courage enough to speak to him.

"Could I trouble you for the sugar?" she asked. Her voice sounded unnatural in her ears.

Without looking up, he gave the sugar bowl a shove that sent it flying along the cloth to her place. "And the cream, please?" she said.

This time he did look up. He gave her a scathing glance. "The cream jug's right by your elbow," he said ungraciously.

"Oh—thanks." She swallowed. "Are you—I thought—if—perhaps we might dance a little this evening. If you're not too busy, that is. The orchestra would be glad to play."

"Sorry, no. When I was a dancing instructor, I got enough of women walking on my feet to last me the rest of my life."

Once more Miss Abernathy swallowed. "Or—we might play some bezarique. Or we could see what records there are in the library for the stereo."

"No, thanks. Frankly, Miss Abernathy, I don't want to do anything at all in company with you."

It was almost with relief that she laid the weapons of allurement aside. "Why not?" she demanded.

"Two reasons. In the first place, I think you're dangerous. Damned dangerous, though you probably don't know it. In the second place, I just don't like you very well."

For a moment he twisted the bangles on his wrist thoughtfully. He seemed about to say something more. He didn't. He shut his book

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with a bang, pushed his chair back, and walked out.

Miss Abernathy stared after him. Her eyes felt hot. So. If that was the way it was . . . Why, he sounded as if he thought it was either him or her! As if they were enemies. She hadn't known he disliked her so. But perhaps he was right. Yes, perhaps he was.

She had to take three sleeping pills that night. When she woke, though, she felt alert and rested, not at all depressed.

She dressed slowly and thoughtfully, stopping often to examine her fingernails, or arrange her toilet things. She might just as well wear that quiet little brown dress and put plain, instead of shimmer, gold dust on her hair. When you were going to war (Was she? Her hands were awfully cold), there was no point in getting all dressed up.

She entered the dining salon with her head held high. Mr. Faxon was already eating—porridge with butter and sugar and cream. Through the transparent cover of the platter beside him, she could see the next course he had selected: three plump hot cakes, garnished with bacon, sausage, ham, and eggs. No wonder he was getting a double chin.

She drank her fruit juice. Really, she felt terrible. She didn't know whether she could go through with it. But she couldn't go on like this either. If Mr. Faxon was wrong, it didn't much matter. If he was right, she might as well find out.

"Mr. Faxon," she said loudly and deliberately, "after breakfast, you and I are going to play a nice game of bezarique."

He looked up sharply from his dish of porridge. His face was savage with annoyance. (If he thinks I'm so darned dangerous, Miss Abernathy thought, he's an awful fool to antagonize me.) "What? Play bezarique with you? You're crazy. Of course not."

Their glances met. Miss Abernathy had a sense of profoundly exerting herself. She was trembling all over. She had to—if she didn't —he—oh—he—

Suddenly it happened. There was a sort of plop in the air between them, and Mr. Faxon's eyes grew glazed. His body took on the familiar slickness and rigidity. He was a dummy too. She'd done it again.

He didn't look quite like the other ones. Miss Abernathy got up from her place and walked around the dummies to where he was sitting. She examined him closely. The stitches in the kidskin of his right forearm seemed a little loose. She worked at them with her fingernail until she got a hole started.

Um-hum. It was just as she had thought. He *wasn't* like the others. He was stuffed with fluffy pink cotton. It smelled of violets.

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She was shaking all over. She got back to her chair somehow and sat down in it. It was awful, terrible; she supposed she was responsible, but she hadn't really meant it to happen. Not exactly. And now she was the only living thing left on the ship.

What should she do now? She didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. It was like wanting to sneeze and hiccough at the same time. And no matter what she did, it wouldn't make any difference. She was the only living thing left—

No. No, she wasn't. There *was* another person left alive. The astrogator. He must still be carrying on his duties—his lonely, high-minded, all-important duties—up forward in his little cubicle. The astrogator! Of course, of course!

Miss Abernathy's trembling had stopped. It wasn't too odd, really, that she hadn't thought of the astrogator. Out of sight, out of mind; and everybody knew that astrogators were too absorbed by their weighty duties to appear in public. Did that mean she oughtn't to go call on him?

She hesitated. But she did so want to see him—and she'd be careful. After all, Mr. Faxon might have been wrong. The captain had said that odd things happened in this part of space.

Almost running, she started toward the part of the ship where the astrogator's quarters must be. At the end of the recreation area there was a bolted door and a sign saying NO ADMITTANCE. She pulled the bolt back and went through.

It was noisier here. The corridor was not so well carpeted, and the hum of machinery filled the air. Nervously, still eagerly, Miss Abernathy hurried on.

There were more doors, more signs reading, variously, NO ADMITTANCE, ENTRANCE FORBIDDEN, KEEP OUT. Miss Abernathy, brows puckered, disregarded them all.

At last she came to the door of doors. The sign on it read: ASTROGATOR. ENTRANCE EXPRESSLY DENIED. KEEP OUT.

She tried the door. It was unlocked. She rapped softly on it.

"C'mon in," said a husky male voice.

Miss Abernathy stepped inside. She could not repress a gasp.

Throughout the rest of the *Vindemiatrix,* every attempt had been made to fence out awareness of the vastness of space. The idea had been to make the passengers feel that they were spending two pleasant months in a superior luxury hotel. Only in the main lounge inconspicuously placed, were there two small indirect viewers through which passengers could look out at what surrounded them. Nobody had ever used the viewers much. But here, in the astrogator's cubicle, one realized abruptly where the *Vindemiatrix* was.

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The whole forward end of the room was a huge indirect viewing plate. It was flanked by a curving double tier of enigmatic instruments and gauges. And all around the room, from ceiling to floor and back to ceiling again, there ran a broad, broad belt, a zodiac, of direct viewers. The reddish light of the ionized hydrogen shone through it. The cubicle seemed to be girdled with misty fire.

Except for the red glow of the gas, the only light in the room came from a small green-shaded lamp over the astrogator's lonely seat.

It was an awesome room. The astrogator himself lay face downward in his bunk, while a robot servant gave him a body massage.

Miss Abernathy advanced timidly. Almost under her feet, in the direct viewers, an enormous blue star burned through the reddish haze with a steady, baleful glare. "Are you the astrogator?" she asked.

"Yessum," he answered languidly. He turned his head toward her. "Sit down, ma'am, and I'll have the robot bring you a drink."

"Thank you." She seated herself on the edge of a chair. "I'm not thirsty now.—So you're the astrogator. It must be an awfully responsible job."

"Oh, it's not so bad." He yawned. "Robbie, here, does most of the work." He indicated a tall, vaguely humanoid mechanism that stood to the left of the tier of instruments.

"Oh. I thought you astrogators had to do a lot of figuring." She relaxed a bit.

"Used to be that way. Not any more. I just punch a button at the beginning of the trip, and the machines bring us on in. It's up to them to do the work."

Once more he yawned. "Wouldn't you like a drink, ma'am?" he asked a little wistfully. "They make nice drinks."

"No, thank you." Miss Abernathy groped after illusions. "But—supposing you wanted to take the ship somewhere besides to Sirius? Wouldn't you have a lot to do then? Calculating, all sorts of work?"

"Naw. See that wheel?" He pointed. "It's got a list of all the major stars on it. You just set the wheel for the right star. It's duck soup."

"I think—I will have a drink now," said Miss Abernathy. While the drink was being brought, she asked, "Don't you get lonesome, though? I'd think you would."

"Unh-unh." He rolled over on his back, exposing his beautifully muscled chest and half his handsome face. "Can't mix with the passengers. Bad for morale. Naw, I don't mind it. I sleep a lot."

"Then—you mean you don't really do any work at all?"

Some of the indignation she felt must have shown in her voice. The

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astrogator giggled. "Aw, ma'am," he said soothingly, "you don't want to take it so hard. It's just one of those things."

One of those things . . . Miss Abernathy felt a flood of uncontrollable disgust. He was the worst of any—worse than the captain, worse than Mr. Elginbrod, worse than Mr. Faxon. He was worse than the dumbest of the passengers. He lay in his bed, and the machines steered the *Vindemiatrix,* and it was just one of those things. What a fool he was!

She was not in the least surprised, she was, rather, gratified, when the one of his eyes she could see took on a glassy stare.

She finished her drink and then went over to his bunk. His skin was kid, like that of the others, but he looked much lumpier, and slackly stuffed. She squeezed him. There was a crunkle. Was he filled with straw? No, it was probably excelsior.

She set the empty glass down on the floor beside him. Through the band of viewers the cloud of gas still burned redly. There was no use in letting the ship go on to Sirius; everyone said that Sirius' planet, which had been colonized by earthmen, was just like being on earth. She wouldn't find what she was looking for there.

Well, then . . . She walked over to the wheel the astrogator had indicated. She studied the list of stars for a moment. Aldebaran. The list said it had a planet, and the name had a lucky sound. It would take a long time to get there, but she had plenty of food.

She moved the pointer on the wheel from Sirius to the new name. Then she began to turn the wheel so the notch in it would correspond.

The wheel turned easily. Eagerly she watched the star fields in the indirect viewer. In a moment they would begin to swing and shift as the ship set on its new course.

The moments passed. The star fields in the viewer continued rock steady. Slowly Miss Abernathy began to feel frightened. Still no change in course, only the steady movement ahead.

She turned on the overhead lights in the room. Now she could see the wheel better. Its connections seemed to be a little loose. She knelt down and followed the cord back with her fingers.

No. It wasn't connected on to anything. It never had been. It just came to an end. The star wheel . . . was a dummy wheel.

She got back to the passengers' quarters somehow. For a while she wandered among her dummies, touching their kidskin bodies and shivering. On impulse she pitched Mr. Elginbrod into the swimming pool, and then shivered worse than ever. Because that kind of change —throwing a dummy into the water—was the only way things could ever change.

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The ship would arrive at Sirius' planet on schedule. (If there was some way of making the machines take the *Vindemiatrix* to Aldebaran, she'd never be able to find it.) The landing would be made just as competently, just as purposefully, as if she weren't the only living thing left on board.

There wouldn't be any trouble about the transformations. People would look the other way and ignore the whole subject. Even if she'd killed everybody on board with arsenic, instead of transforming them accidentally while the ship was going through a cloud of magnetized hydrogen, there wouldn't have been any trouble. People were too dumb to care. It would just be one of those things.

She began to cry. Dimly, far forward in the ship, she could hear the usual happy, impersonal hum of the machinery, inexorably carrying the ship toward Sirius. It made her cry harder than ever. A robot servant glided up and gently put a fresh white handkerchief in her hand.

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When Evelyn E. Smith's first fiction appeared here (The Martian and the Magician, *F&SF, November 1952*), *she was already a well-established published author . . . of crossword puzzles. Her devious word-constructions have appeared frequently in the New York* Times, *and from time to time in such unanticipated markets as* Curtain and Drapery Magazine. *As a crossword addict myself, I am astonished to learn that these intricacies can be composed by a delightful and witty brunette in her twenties. One expects a creator more like . . . well, like George, the single-minded protagonist of this captivating little story.*

D
A
B A X B R
B
R

by EVELYN E. SMITH

En route to the subway, George ran into the little man from the Planetarium. He used to meet him occasionally when he made one of his trips to the Library, and by now they had reached the stage where they were forced to nod to each other, although neither seemed anxious to further the acquaintance. George didn't suppose the little man actually came from the Planetarium itself; he probably lived somewhere nearby. Whenever George encountered him, though, it was outside the Planetarium, so he came to think of him as "the little man from the Planetarium" when he thought of him at all.

To be a little man in George's eyes was to be a very small man indeed, for George himself was well under middle height. Physically, the two had much in common. Both wore thick-lensed glasses—however, George's were clear, while the other's were dark and almost opaque. Since he carried his head thrust forward from stooped shoulders, it was only occasionally that his eyes were visible, each glimmering like a fiery spark in the bottom of a well. But George rarely could bring himself to look directly into anyone's eyes; it seemed like such an invasion of privacy.

The two little men trotted down

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the subway stairs, not quite in step, each wishing to dissociate himself from the other without impoliteness and neither quite knowing how to do it. "Raw day," George finally goaded himself into saying. Automatically he crossed *day* with *raw* and got:

O R E
D A Y
E W E

"Yes," the other man agreed in a tinny voice, "itt is nott plee-asantt."

"Funny accent," George thought, as he had before. He'd never been able to identify it, for the other man had never said enough. But the question nagged at him each time it arose. He was much too polite, however, to ask the stranger what his native tongue was, even though he could, of course, plead a special interest in words to justify his intrusion.

The train pulled in just as they stepped down onto the platform. Undoubtedly they would have sat as far away from each other as possible, if they could have done so, but only one double seat was vacant. If either were to stand, it would look pointedly insulting. Being more agile, the man from the Planetarium secured the place near the window, which was still the preferred spot—a throwback to the days when all vehicles ran above ground and there was something to be seen outside beyond murky tunnels and the intermittent glitter of another underground train flashing past.

The stranger immediately pulled some envelopes out of his pocket and began to slit them open and read their contents—an obvious hint to George that further conversation would be unwelcome. George, who had been wondering how to discourage the other man from trying to talk to him, was indignant. If he had thought to provide himself with a paper, he would have opened it with a loud rustle. As it was, he was forced to devote himself to the headlines on other people's newspapers, always absorbed in his search for new words.

News items always provided a fruitful source of such valuable material for his crossword puzzles—particularly for the *Times,* which liked topical references and approved of proper nouns if they were newsworthy. Oriental and East European statesmen frequently ended in the most magnificent vowels, such as *i* or *u*—both rare as terminal vowels in the English language. Hence, every new political appointment was a potential thrill for the puzzle virtuoso. George could never even feel as actively hostile toward the Russians as he knew a decent American citizen should, because what other people had the grace to end so frequently in *v*? He crossed Krug-

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lov with Dodgers, both very topical:

H	O	L	D	E	R	■
O	R	I	O	N	■	R
N	E	E	D	■	P	I
K	R	U	G	L	O	V
E	S	■	E	A	S	E
D	■	G	R	I	S	T
■	M	A	S	C	E	S

Then he pursed his lips as somebody came in with a late paper. The French Cabinet had fallen again. Even though he approved of new names in politics, the French really overdid it. Each time their cabinet fell, he suffered a sharp personal blow; for he would have to revise the whole diplomatic list that he had prepared himself and carefully alphabetized backward. And he'd have to retype that puzzle he'd planned to mail to the *Times* that afternoon—the definition "French Premier" would have to be changed to "former French Premier," or very possibly, "future French Premier." You couldn't trust the French. He disapproved of them; he felt their political instability betrayed their lack of neat and orderly minds. No wonder crossword puzzles did not have great popularity in France.

The trouble with you, my dear Almus, is that you do not have enough baxbr.

George blushed maroon as he caught his seatmate's eye. Although he looked away quickly, he could not avoid seeing the other man ostentatiously fold his letter and put it away.

In his absent-minded musing over the capriciousness of French politics, George had committed a terrible social solecism. He had allowed his eyes to rest, however inadvertently upon someone else's *personal correspondence.*

He knew he should immediately obliterate from his memory any information gained in such an unprincipled manner, but somehow he could not forget *baxbr.* It was such a good word—five letters and only one vowel; moreover, the terminal *xbr* was most unusual . . . he might even go so far as to stick his neck out, quietly to himself, and say it was unique. He crossed the word with the newsworthy Nixon—

						R	A	T
					H	O	L	E
				N	O	V	A	E
			G	I	B	E	R	S
		B	A	X	B	R		
C	A	R	B	O	Y			
O	N	I	O	N				
S	T	A	R					
T	A	R						

—and found he had been fortunate enough to include an actress and

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a former cabinet member as well.

It must be a foreign word, used by Almus' correspondent to convey some nuance of meaning for which there was no precise English equivalent. That made it somewhat less useful for, as a general rule, any but the most common foreign words were frowned upon. However, that was in the small daily crosswords; foreign terms were sometimes permissible in the larger and more complicated Sunday ones, if used with discretion. After all, if he had got away with *katabothron* and *hyperchamaerrhine,* good English words though they were, no one should look askance at a mere *baxbr.*

But in what language was it? He simply couldn't ask Almus . . . and anyway, was it Almus something, or something Almus? The best thing would be to forget all about the word. He tried to lose himself in the advertisements posted all around the car, and achieved an intricate effect—

—but his heart wasn't really in it.

Both of the men got off at Forty-Second Street and walked toward the Library. "It might even rain," George said venturesomely.

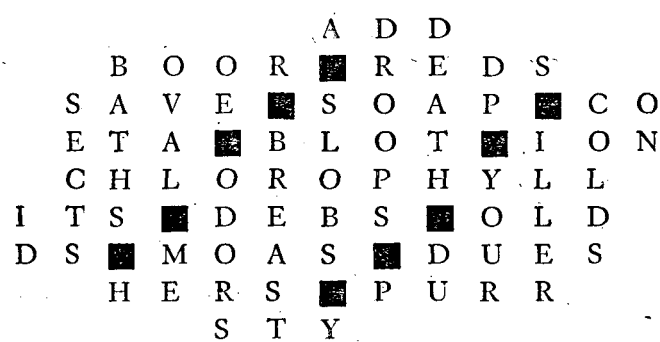
"I sould nott be soorpris-ed," replied the other.

If only George could place his accent, for the likelihood was that *baxbr* was in Almus's native tongue. . . .

They parted in the 42d Street foyer of the Library. Almus entered a telephone booth on the ground floor, while George rode up to the reference department.

He couldn't help looking up *baxbr* in Webster's Unabridged. Of course it wasn't there. He would have been surprised if it had been, because he didn't recall ever having noticed it there, and he had read the book through twice. Nonetheless, the true scholar always checks and rechecks.

George then looked the word up in the French, German, Italian, Spanish, Polish, Swedish, Norwe-



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gian, Albanian, Dutch, Romanian, Malayan, Catalan, and Provencal dictionaries. It wasn't in any of them. One of the librarians with whom he had some acquaintance came to his assistance. Together they looked it up in Russian, Japanese, Chinese, Greek, Welsh, Hebrew, Hindustani, Armenian, Manchu, Bulgarian, Telugu, Arapahoe, Kabyle, Yoruba, Singhalese, Votyak, Bantu, and Mixtec. It wasn't in any of those, either.

"It's no use," she said finally. "If we don't have it, there's no such thing. I guess it must be a made-up word."

"Do people *make up* words?" George asked incredulously.

"Why, of course. Didn't you ever make up words when you were a little boy?" She smiled at him.

George backed away. "Certainly not," he said austerely.

Obviously the Library was going to be no help at all. He had placed such faith in it, and it, too, had failed him in his hour of need.

Baxbr had so preoccupied him that he forgot about the information he had originally come to look up. Without thinking, he rode downstairs, left the building, and turned his steps toward Sixth Avenue. Almus was also going back at just that time. "Funny coincidence," George thought. It would never have occurred to him that the other could possibly have been lying in wait for him. People didn't do that sort of thing.

"Didn't rain after all," George said.

"Itt mig-hutt yett," answered Almus. He seemed unusually talkative. "It's ee-arly still. Time for many things to happen."

"Yes," George agreed, frowning. Now Almus had spoken three whole sentences—and still George couldn't identify his accent.

They descended the steps and silently inserted their respective tokens in the turnstile. Together they stood on the platform waiting for the train to come. George could hold himself in no longer. "Excuse me, Mr.—er—Almus," he burst out, "I know this is dreadfully impertinent of me, but I couldn't help reading one sentence in your letter before . . ."

"Yes?" Almus lifted his head, so the thick circles of dark glass faced George squarely. Behind them his eyes flickered like the filaments of an incandescent bulb.

"And I was struck by a word—*baxbr* . . ."

"*Baxbr*," Almus corrected. "Itt means," he went on to explain in his flat metallic voice, "*daring . . . enterprise . . . ini-ti-ative.* Itt is harud to explain your langyuage; there is no real equivalentt."

"If you'll excuse me for asking, what language is it in?"

". . . You'd call itt Martian."

"Oh," George said. "And I suppose your correspondent would be a Martian, too?"

"Yes, and a fool as well." The

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timbre and intonation of Almus's voice didn't change, but the increased rapidity of his speech and the thickening of his accent seemed to indicate that he was affected by some emotion. Probably, from the context of his words, anger. "He himseluf cooled use a little more *daxbr*—that is to say, *cau-ti-on*. We were tolud to communicate with one another in nothing but Engulis to avo-id suspissi-on. Butt he—the *jruzlik*—he has to be reckless and putt in a Martian worud. Now you have seen—you suspecutt. I must suchee-dule the invas-i-on for today. And I had nott planned itt for monuths."

"Perhaps that's what he wanted," George said vaguely, fitting the facts into their proper squares. "Maybe he used the word purposely because he wanted the invasion to start today—thought if he used less *daxbr*, he'd force you to use more *baxbr*."

He thought:

A C H E S
D R O M E
D A X B R
E T H E R
D E A R Y

He'd been trying to fit the Romanian prime minister in somewhere for the longest time!

The dark lenses turned toward him again. Although the tone of his voice apparently couldn't change, Almus managed to convey surprise. "You may very well be righutt. He always did wantt the wuhole thing to be over so we cooled go bakuk home. Ha, as soon as we have finished annihilating your speessies, I sall personally annihilate him."

"That sould—should be nice," George agreed absently.

He thoughtfully crossed Martian with Reuther:

R
P E A
M A U L S
M A R T I A N
O T H E R
Y E N
R

The train came in. There were no double seats; so the two men sat at opposite ends of the car—George weaving intricate word patterns, the Martian absorbed in his own alien thoughts.

Both got out at 81st Street, and nodded to each other in perfunctory farewell. This time George distinctly saw Almus turn in at the Planetarium.

"It seems an orderly arrangement," he thought.

He climbed up the three flights that led to his modest but grimly immaculate apartment. There he opened his own personal copy of the Unabridged Webster. It said:

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Martian. . . . —n. one of the hypothetical inhabitants of Mars.

There was the dull boom of an explosion outside. The house swayed from side to side and shook all over.

"Hypothetical," George said reflectively to himself, brushing plaster off the dictionary. "Supposed—theoretical—in short, just imaginary, without any real existence. And yet," he mused, as another blast shook the house, "one might be able to construct an entirely hypothetical sequence of crossword puzzles on purely theoretical words." The prospect excited him tremendously.

He had just begun to work when the house collapsed on top of him.

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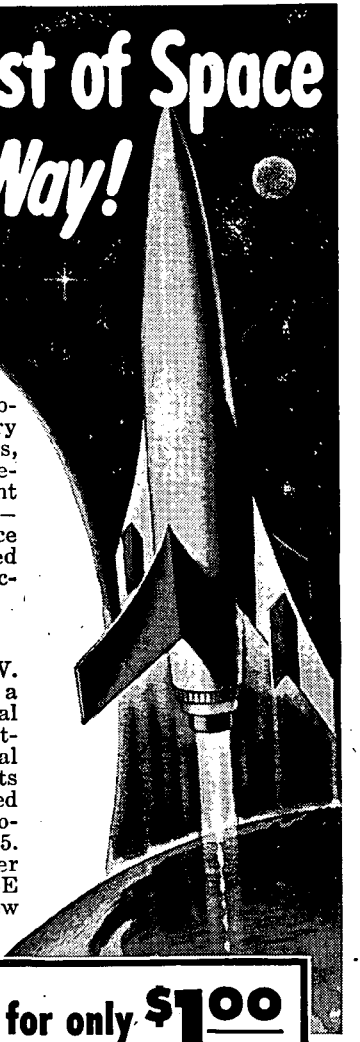

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